

REPORT TO PARISH – September 20, 2020

Good morning!

Two months ago, I gave a general report on parish life since the start of the covid-19 pandemic. Obviously, that pandemic and its constraints are still very much with us. So this may be a good time for another conversation.

Let me begin, by admitting right away that two months more of this have not made it any easier for any of us. This has been and continues to be a very difficult time - not least because this crisis has been so badly managed in so many ways, which has made a difficult situation even more so. So many things that we used to take for granted - even things like shaking hands - have disappeared and may never come back. In the process, however, this pandemic has also challenged us to pay attention to what Jesus in the Gospel calls "the signs of the times" - to recognize our responsibilities to one another and to the community as a whole and to respond to this crisis in ways which strengthen us as a parish, as a Church, as a country, rather than diminish and divide us.

Even so, what is the effect, for example, of reacting to one another through the lens that everyone is a potential source of infection? And what is the effect of what inevitably follows from that – namely, that we avoid one another, when in a better world we would welcome one another and greet one another, maybe shake hands, maybe even hug one another? And what about all the anger we may find ourselves feeling when other behave irresponsibly, recklessly, selfishly? All of that is tearing us apart and tearing the community down, instead of bringing us together and building us up!

Ever since the pandemic took over our lives so completely back in mid-March, I have been encouraging all of us to keep in touch - to keep in touch with the parish by reading the Bulletin on the parish website or the parish app or the parish Facebook page, and, much more important, to keep in touch with one another, especially those who are alone or in danger of becoming isolated. The Paulist Fathers recently started meeting in smaller groups on zoom to share experiences and support each other. I am not a particular fan of zoom meeting, but I value the opportunity to see and speak with others. I encourage you to do the same in whatever ways work best for you. We call ourselves the Body of Christ, which indeed we are. But, as Saint Paul reminds us, that means that when any one member of the body suffers, the whole body is affected, we all suffer together.

Some of us have lost loved ones during this time, and many more know others who have lost loved ones. Last Tuesday, on the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, the Paulist Fathers sponsored an on-line coast-to-coast prayer service to remember for all who have died during this pandemic. For me personally, I found it a very moving experience, and I am grateful to Natalie Martin and Mark Reda for making it possible for our parish' to participate. If you missed it you can still access it on the Paulist Fathers' YouTube page.

Today's Bulletin contains the annual parish Financial Report for Fiscal year 2019-2020. I encourage you to read it, either in the bulletin or on the parish website. If you have any questions, I or someone from the Finance Council will try to answer. (The Bulletin also has an update on the 2020 Bishop's Appeal. So far we are at 88% of our Bishop's Appeal Goal.) One of the things that stands out in the financial report is how this pandemic has created all sorts of unexpected expenses - from sanitizing equipment to improved internet connectivity so that we can live-stream Sunday Mass and do some of the other things we need to do to keep parish life going. (Just this week, for example, we installed a new air-purification system in the church to further minimize risk.) It is primarily to cover all these kinds of extra costs - present and future - that I established my *25th Anniversary Fund for a Post-Pandemic Parish Future*. Your response to this request has been overwhelmingly encouraging. Whatever material practical problems have burdened us in my 10 years as your pastor, from a new ceiling to a new boiler, I have always been confident that I could count on your commitment to our parish, your love for the Church and for one another, to see us through. An ancient image of the Church is that of a boat, being tossed about by the waves during a storm, which, as Pope Francis has reminded us, is an especially apt image of the Church in this current crisis. We are all in the same boat, and we all have to do our part to row the boat to safety.

Speaking of anniversaries, as you know this fall marks the 165th anniversary of the founding of this parish. Also yesterday was the anniversary of the Dedication in 1886 of our present parish church. Since 1855, there has been a Catholic Church here at the top of Summit Hill, a vibrant Catholic community spreading the good news and living a faithful life here in downtown Knoxville, extending the Kingdom of God's blessings throughout East Tennessee. That history has continued and will continue through this pandemic to respond to whatever new challenges the post-pandemic world will have in store for us.

And so, we continue. We continue to observe all the proper precautions medical science suggests. We wear masks - not just here in church but everywhere. We maintain appropriate distance - not just here in church but everywhere. We have adapted how we celebrate Mass and how we conduct parish activities - so that we will be able to keep celebrating Mass and continue having parish activities. The more careful and conscientious we all are, the more we will be able to do - and we will be better for it and a better parish as a result.

In many places, it is still effectively impossible for the Church to gather as a community, and the liturgy has increasingly become strangely detached from our experience of being together as a community. Who can say what the long-term consequences of that will be? Meanwhile, Mass is being celebrated in our church every single day and twice on Saturday, just as we did before the pandemic, and, for now, twice on Sunday. Since seating in the church is limited, we also offer the option of attending in the parish hall, which is especially convenient if you want to avoid the stairs or would like a little more space between you and everyone else. Attendance at Sunday Mass is increasing and is now about 37% of what it was at this time a year ago. What that reduced attendance may mean for the future – for the long-term viability of this parish and for long-term future of the Church in the United States – nobody knows yet.

Meanwhile, some parish activities and meetings have resumed. The IC Bees Quilting Group is again meeting weekly. The Women's Group held a successful Christ Child Baby Shower. The Knights of Columbus have been meeting regularly as well. Recently, I began meeting weekly (on zoom) with a group of young couples in the parish who expressed a desire to get together for bible study. We are studying the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of the apostolic Church, which remains the model, the inspiration, and the challenge for the Church in every time and place, including our own. Meanwhile, Saint Joseph School and Knoxville Catholic High School are both back in operation, and Fr. Tim and I have taken our turns celebrating the morning Mass at Saint Joseph's. Religious Education classes for those in public schools, including preparation for First Holy Communion and Confirmation, and Youth Ministry meetings are also starting again. And the 2nd-Saturday of the Month Clean-Up Days at Calvary Cemetery are also going forward. With masks and appropriate

distance, I look forward to our annual Rosary Procession at Calvary Cemetery on Sunday, November 1.

Lastly, some Paulist news: At the end of August, two new novices joined the Paulist novitiate in Washington. This month, two Paulist seminarians, Michael Cruickshank and Richard Whitney, made their lifelong commitment to the Paulist Fathers and were ordained deacons. We look forward to their ordination as priests next year. Meanwhile, ground will soon be broken for our new Paulist House of Studies in Washington, which will house our student community as they prepare themselves to make Isaac Hecker's hope continue to come alive in our country, whatever lies ahead after this crisis. The Paulist Fathers will be holding an on-line gala to mark the groundbreaking on Saturday, October 17, which will highlight every Paulist parish. You will be hearing more about this in the next several weeks.

Today's Bulletin also invites you to participate in a new Paulist project. Paulist Evangelization Ministries is developing a *Catholic Discipleship Profile™* and has asked us for feedback at this stage of its development. Please read the more detailed description in today's bulletin and follow the instructions to participate.

Also, as Election Day nears, the Paulist Fathers have published A Paulist Reflection for the 2020 Elections, which "addresses the 'Signs of the Times' in our country since March — Covid-19, economic disaster, and racial unrest — and how those might impact our choices for leadership in our Federal, State, and Local elections." This document and related materials may be found at [Paulist.org/vote](https://www.paulist.org/vote).

Finally I invite all of you who wish to join me - either in person or (more likely on-line - for a Solemn Mass of Thanksgiving on Thursday, October 29, to mark my 25th anniversary of ordination.

Meanwhile, let us continue to pray for and with one another:

Almighty and eternal God, our refuge in every danger,
to whom we turn in our distress;
in faith we pray look with compassion on the afflicted,
grant eternal rest to the dead, comfort to mourners,
healing to the sick, peace to the dying,
strength to healthcare workers, wisdom to our leaders,
and the courage to reach out to all in love,
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.