

Roman Catholic Church – Diocese of Little Rock
St. Mary’s Parish – Paragould, AR.

A parish is a community of the faithful in the Catholic Church, whose pastoral care has been entrusted to a Parish Priest under the authority of the Diocesan Bishop. Our parish has been in existence since 1883 (almost 140 years!), with our school having been founded in the very early days around 1890.

One of the charges, or responsibilities, a parish has is to help the Priest be aware and have good knowledge of many things. While we might agree that the role of a parish is to provide and care for the spiritual needs of the faithful, we do have more responsibilities as members of the parish. For the parish to effectively exist, we must also continuously evaluate and provide for the fiscal needs as well. This includes buildings, grounds, and so much more! Of course, all of this takes funding to ensure the long-term viability of our parish.

Any financial planner will tell you that you should look at your finances periodically to see where you are and where you are headed. Our committee has been tasked with the responsibility of reviewing finances for both the Church and School, as an initial step in building a long-term strategic plan for the future operation of the parish. We are a faith family, and each committee member has a deep commitment to St. Mary’s, as well as many fond memories tied to our School. St. Mary’s School is a part of who we are.

For many years, probably for all the years of existence, our parish has been able to provide supplemental funding for our school to operate. In other words, the school does not generate enough income through tuition and fundraising to operate on its own. Currently, the school subsidy is generally around \$140,000 per year. This number can of course vary due to costs, incomes, etc., but this is a good average number based on our history.

Based on trends in parish income over at least the past 5 years, current conditions are not favorable for the parish to sustain the school subsidy needs. Generally speaking, collections and incomes for the parish are just meeting the needs of operations for the Church, with very slim margins. That is provided we only have a few extraordinary expenses or major repairs! Please understand that we do have funds saved for times like these; but financial trends clearly show that we are depleting those savings at a rate that is not sustainable for the future viability of our parish.

After examining the figures from past years, it has become painfully obvious to the committee that at the present income and expense rates, (barring any large estate/one-time donations), the entire savings of both the Church and School could be completely depleted in **7** years:

- At the subsidy rate of \$140,000/year in School needs, the **School Trust Fund** will be exhausted in **4** years.
- At the subsidy rate of \$140,000/year in School needs, the **Church Savings** will be exhausted in another **3** years.

Having said the above, we as a parish community are at a crossroads with regard to finances. Obviously, complete depletion of all savings IS NOT AN OPTION. We have time to effectively respond to this challenge and change our trajectory for the future, but at current trends, our time is running out! This is a significant challenge that we face collectively, but also individually as faithful members of St. Mary’s Parish.

A long-term strategic plan will help to define ways that each one of us can contribute to the future success of our parish. Based on our current patterns of weekly/monthly collections, it is not reasonable to expect our routine donors to shoulder the entire burden of making up the \$140,000 annual school subsidy. Other ways to help meet this need could include increasing enrollment, increasing tuition, and increasing the number of large fundraisers. No one thing will meet this challenge, but a combination of these things can meet the needs of our school.

We need to prayerfully consider the question: “Do we want to give our children a good faith-filled Catholic education, and how important is that to each one of us? “. The only way to demonstrate your commitment to the school is through prayer; and your charitable contributions of time, talent, and treasure. The future of our Catholic faith depends on the next generation. How do you see your faith in the next generation?

Next week, we will conduct a Parish survey at weekend masses to help us determine our direction for the future. Prayerfully consider your thoughts and answers to the difficult questions that we must answer. While this is our present, it does not have to be our future. We still have choices that can change our future.