

[Readings: Acts 2:1-11; Ps. 104; 1 Cor. 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23]

When I first arrived as pastor here almost nine years ago, I established the practice of giving a “State of the Parish” address on Pentecost Sunday weekend. The COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary halt on that, so I have chosen to revisit that tradition. So, here we go! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

After traveling the United States for 10 months during 1831-32, the French diplomat and political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville declared in his classic work “Democracy in America” that “there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over people’s souls than in America.”

Fast forward almost 200 years later. A new report from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) titled “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval” casts a shadow of doubt on the religious fervor of Americans, only 16% of whom stated that religion is the most important thing in their lives. Those with no religious affiliation represented 27% of the population. Likewise a majority of Americans either seldom (28%) or never (29%) attend religious services; and more than one-third (37%) of those who exited a religion identified themselves as “former” Catholics.

Father Thomas Gaunt, the coordinator of the study, noted a distinction between institutional membership and belief. “These are people who believe in God,” he said. “They just don’t necessarily believe in institutional churches.”

“When you’re in the Northeast and Midwest and you’re looking at an empty church, that’s us -- that’s just kind of hard to comprehend. But in the South, Fr. Gaunt says, “the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Georgia added a million Catholics to its membership rolls over the last 30 years”.

Sunday Mass attendance has almost returned to pre-COVID levels. Here at St. Martin de Porres, I would say that we are at 60% attendance. Over 100 people come to each of the three Sunday Masses, with the 11 AM Mass nearing 150. There is no doubt that the place of faith in American life has declined, in the lives of individuals, and in our society as a whole.

But two things can be true at once. One is that there is a decline. Two, there is also a hunger for meaning, for belonging. That's what we have to focus on and work on.

Among the leading reasons for switching a religious tradition or denomination, or stopping going to church at all are these. 56% say they stopped believing in the religion's teachings. 30% were turned off by perceived negative teachings or treatment people with same-sex attraction. 29% said that their family growing up was not that religious. 27% were disillusioned by scandals involving leaders in their former religion. And 18% pointed to a traumatic event in their lives. If God allowed this to happen to me, there must not be any God.

Specifically at St. Martin de Porres, our numbers are down for three primary demographic reasons.

First, our congregation is aging, and we average 70 funerals a year.

Secondly, many members of our congregation no longer are able to live independently, so they move in with their adult children or into assisted living.

Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic crushed us terribly. While the number of parishioners who died from COVID were few, it brought a halt to parish activities, home visits to the sick, and going to church. Since we are back to having public Masses, I have heard this question from formerly active folks: "Why dress up and go to church when you can watch it on TV in your pajamas and robe with a good cup of coffee?"

The worst abuse I heard of was the older couple, members of another parish, who take the leftover Christmas wafers (Oplatki) during the Mass, put it on a plate on the coffee table in front of the TV, and then after the priest consecrates the bread on TV, at communion time, they give each other the Christmas wafer, thinking that they are receiving Holy Communion. OY!

In spite of all these setbacks, I believe with all my heart that we are aging, we are changing, but we are NOT dying! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

We are reaching out to the unchurched and the fallen-away Catholics with gift books when they come at Christmas and Easter to awaken and to deepen their faith: "Prayers to Start Your Day," by Criswell Freeman, and Gus Lloyd's

fifth volume of “A Minute in the Church: Back to the Basics. “ More young singles and couples are attending, some couples with children. “Let the little children come to me.” And they do at the Children’s Liturgy of the Word which is available most Sundays at the 11:00 AM Mass. They are taking the summer off.

In the area of Stewardship, how to share and sacrifice your time, talent and treasure, I ask you to prayerfully discern how you will be able to participate more fully in our parish life. First and foremost, prayer is essential to our relationship with the Lord. Secondly, quality time with members of our family. Then our work. Finally, time for participation in parish activities. All of our parish ministries and services need additional members. We see the same people every weekend serving as Ushers, Lectors, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and Altar Servers, but we need more. Many more! There is even a place for you in our music ministry! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

The Education Commission sponsored “Bring Your Parents to Class” sessions, which included praying the Holy Rosary together, walking through the Stations of the Cross, and a “Stump the Pastor” information night. I am three for three! Christian Formation students brought the Jesse Tree to our tree-trimming service in December during Sunday Mass. We collected hundreds of pounds of plastic bottles and cans to help the environment. The profits from turning them in allowed us to purchase many needed items for the church, including priest’s vestments and banners, which were not in our budget.

In addition to its regular outreach, the Christian Service Commission put together 250 Christmas gift bags for the residents of Autumn Woods Nursing Home. We have begun fund-raising and gathering items for the Vets Returning Home, who come from all areas of Macomb County, including Warren.

Thousands of dollars and tons of food were donated for our “Spirit of Giving Hope” holiday giving program at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

We also improved our church sound system, replaced pavers around the church, repaired and painted the light posts in our church parking lot, and removed dying and dangerous tree branches which were a safety hazard. We made the exterior and interior of our church, parish center and rectory burst into

color with fresh flowers and plants. The people of St. Martin de Porres are the most generous parishioners I have ever met in my 41 years of priesthood! Thank you and God bless you for that! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

Speaking of budgets, we had the worst year ever during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we, like all parishes, are still recovering from the devastating financial crisis that followed. Although our Sunday offertory income went down 50%, I am proud to say that there were no staff lay-offs the entire time. Every staff person kept their job, although there was a cut in pay and benefits to balance the budget.

Last year and this year have been a struggle to meet our weekly budgeted Sunday collection. In 2017, six years ago, we had 1,174 households with 2,349 individual members. This year, those numbers went south with only 693 parish households and 1,588 individual members. Again, in six years, we lost 481 households, mostly single widows and widowers, and we lost 761 individuals due to death or moving out of the area to live with adult children.

Our Sunday collection for the current year and for the next budget year
AMEN

I need us all, including myself, to step up to the plate to cover the deficit. Remember what our American Bishops have said for decades: a person who tithes gives 10% of their total income back to God. 5% goes to their favorite charities, 4% goes to the local parish, and 1% goes to the annual Catholic Service Appeal.

I ask you this week to get a calculator, do some calculating, and prayerfully consider how you can tithe your gift to God, who cannot be outdone in generosity. I covet and trust in your generosity and in your support! One parishioner asked if we are talking gross or net income! I will take net!

Last year, the Archdiocese of Detroit began a process called, "Families of Parishes." Existing parishes were teamed up into "families." Our family is St. Blase, St. Ephrem, and St. Michael Parishes, all in Sterling Heights, and us. We are called, "Saints among the Saints," from the First Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation. I am happy to say that all four pastors get along fine, and all four

parishes are working together to share our gifts with one another. This cannot be said of all Families of Parishes in the Archdiocese. Our parish finances are to be kept separate, with separate Parish Finance Councils, according to Canon Law. I believe with all my heart that this Family concept is a work of the Holy Spirit and an inspiration of Archbishop Allen Vigneron. Journey with me in this new chapter of our parish history. *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

I read somewhere that there are four levels of happiness. The first comes from momentary pleasure. It's all about me, it's all about right now. Instant gratification.

The second level of happiness is the personal satisfaction I receive for a task well-done. I have used my God-given talents to the best of my ability.

The third level of happiness is making a difference by helping others. When I see a need and respond to it generously, I make the presence of God real for the other person. And they, in turn, do the same for me.

The highest form of happiness is union with God. This happens when we are fully human, fully alive, fully open to the Holy Spirit, and as Matthew Kelly puts it, "being the very best version of myself."

This is why Jesus Christ came; this is why He sends the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God will make us one with God. When we open ourselves to receive the Spirit of God, we will be strong enough to inspire and empower others. The Holy Spirit helps sinful people to receive the power of God to repent of their sins. The Advocate will help us to stand next to God, and to "Unleash the Gospel" in our parish, in our Archdiocese and in the world! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit! Breathe on us, O Spirit of God! AMEN! ALLELUIA!