

State of the Parish—10th Anniversary Peace of Christ Parish Dinner (5/20/17)

Welcome to this 2017 Ten-Dollar Parish Dinner in honor of the 10th anniversary of Peace of Christ Parish. As I give this “State of the Parish” address, I can truly say that I never thought I would be here to give such a presentation. As you may know, pastor appointments are usually for a term of 6 years, normally renewable once to a maximum of 12 years. Bishop Matano, though, has been lenient with that rule particularly for special circumstances, and when my Mom was facing advancing dementia and residing in the skilled nursing section of the Episcopal Home at the time of the conclusion of my 2nd term here last June, he extended my appointment 3 years to the time when I would reach what has been the normal retirement age (or “age at which one reaches eligibility for senior status”), that is, my 70th birthday in the year 2019.

So, now that I am still here at the time of our parish’s 10th anniversary, I consulted our Pastoral Council and we decided to have this dinner and a “State of the Parish” presentation, consisting of a report by me and also of my answering various questions submitted by parishioners who would submit inquiries in the weeks leading up to this dinner. The main thing I wish to convey at this time is my thanks:

- to all of you for coming to this special occasion;
- to Bob Crego and all who have worked with him and for our parish as a whole in making this gathering a possibility and a reality; and
- to all who have worked so hard over these past ten years in your great care not only for the parish, but for making the parish one which is inviting to others and responsive to needs in the community as we see not only in our annual Community Outreach Day, but also in the many activities of our Social Ministry Committee, Peace and Justice Committee, Rochester ACTS participation, and interaction with so many other churches and agencies in the neighborhoods which make up our parish.

When I came here in 2004, the hard work of those who had already been at work among you on the Inter Parish Advisory Team (IPAT) was quite evident. You had already worked out your Sunday Mass schedule which is still the same today. And though we were still three separate parishes with separate offices, councils, committees, staffs, and bulletins, over the next three years, we decided on a plan for addressing those redundancies and how to morph into one parish with only one of each committee and council, one staff and one bulletin, and eventually one office. We faced some tough days when St. John the Evangelist School and St. Ambrose School were both closed in 2005 and we had to figure out how to

continue Catholic School Education in a consolidated manner via the new St. John Neumann School, run first by the diocese and now by the parish.

On May 17, 2007 (10 years ago last Wednesday), we received our formal civil and canonical paperwork declaring us officially to be “Peace of Christ Parish,” a name suggested and selected by you and approved by Bishop Clark.

We had a successful facilities campaign the next year in 2008 to address significant needs relative to boilers and parking lots and roofs just for starters.

We developed a new Vision Statement in 2009 to identify our priorities.

We spent a year-long focus in 2010 on the Mass which is so central to all that we are about.

We received our St. John Neumann School back from the diocese when it reverted the school to our parish care in 2011.

We spent the bulk of 2012 getting used to the new Missal that we had started using as of the First Sunday of Advent at the beginning of that liturgical year.

We established a Knights of Columbus Council and Auxiliary in 2013 which has blossomed so beautifully as a prayerful and service organization in our parish.

We observed a sum total of 1,000 years of commemorations of various milestones in 2014 as outlined on our parish web site that year.

We produced our current pictorial directory for use in the parish in 2015.

We had a very meaningful Year of Mercy under the direction of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, in 2016.

And now in 2017, we begin our 2nd decade as “Peace of Christ Roman Catholic Parish of Rochester, NY” (which is the formal title of our parish corporation under church and civil law—in case you haven’t gotten around to finalizing your will yet).

As I reviewed our record books in preparation for this speech, I found that we have approximately 1,641 families registered in the parish, and that includes some 3,263 individual parishioners. Approximately 1/3 of them attend Mass each week, and last year when we had an Increased Offertory Appeal at our annual Stewardship “Time-Talent-Treasure” time, you all were very responsive and we actually were able to erase from our weekly bulletin those negative variances between amounts needed to pay our bills and amounts given each week by those in the pews. Thanks so very much. As we prepare to do this year’s Stewardship “Time-Talent-Treasure” outreach through the mail, it is our hope we can all collectively respond positively in adjusting both for inflation and for expected expenses so that we can stay ahead of the curve through the year ahead. Just this week, we encountered an unexpected expense of over \$10,000 to fix a drainage

issue on one of our properties. The 2017 forms will be received soon. If we all make a prayerful response, we should be well-positioned for a positive year ahead.

During the past 10 years, we have done some 588 baptisms—that's more than one new parishioner each week since becoming Peace of Christ. We have also done 290 First Communions, 236 Confirmations, and 177 Weddings. Unfortunately during that same time, we have done over 930 individual anointings of the sick and over 930 funerals

In reflecting on those figures, it certainly shows a lot of life in the parish, a parish which is very busy sacramentally, and indeed I am grateful that the Bishop has sent us not just one parochial vicar, but for about half of our ten years as Peace of Christ, we have had two parochial vicars on staff, in addition to our 3 fine Pastoral Associates, our Faith Formation Director, our Liturgical Music Directors, our Finance and Office and Maintenance staff, those who work in our St. John Neumann School, and countless lay volunteers who work tirelessly on numerous committees, councils, projects and in the Knights of Columbus and its Auxiliary to address the very diverse needs of being a parish today.

As staff has reflected on the above facts and figures, although we are happy with indications of so much life, we would love to do something to stave the drop-off from Baptisms to Weddings and from registered parishioners to actual practicing parishioners. This calls for proactive efforts in the area of evangelization, and the diocese is currently offering training for one such process called "Christ Life" which a number of us attended this very weekend, last night and all day today. We still have much to sort out in this regard, but we'll keep you posted as we and many other parishes roll this out in the months ahead.

One of the most important aspects of a parish that is on a growth track is good communication, and one of the ways we want to try to achieve that here is by this very evening for which a number of you submitted questions. At this time, I will attempt to respond to them as best I can. Certainly as you may have questions on any matter after this evening, feel free to send in your questions and I'll either address them in the bulletin or at least at staff meetings as appropriate for the best response possible. These then are the inquiries I have received:

Why does someone have to read the bulletin to us after Mass? I enjoy reading it myself when I get home.

Our general policy is to announce primarily things that are happening immediately after Mass, be they sale of tickets in the vestibule or an event

occurring in the hall. Sometimes, extra emphasis is given by way of an announcement (even if it is in the bulletin) to draw special attention to it (e.g., there is a Holy Day of Obligation this Thursday: Don't miss Mass or you're going to Hell!). Something like that. I will say, though, that there are times when staff gets pressured by organizers of upcoming events to do extra announcements even though there is nothing immediately after Mass related to their event. Those folks, perhaps, need to be sensitive to opinions such as this writer expresses and only expect announcements for same-day activities. It truly is a delicate balancing act.

Would it be possible to have the ushers pass out bulletins at the end of Mass rather than place them in the holders for their taking? As an usher at 9:45, I have noticed people reading bulletins during Mass and then leaving them in the pews. P.S.: I wouldn't want a change to cause an uprising.

I probably am too laissez-faire when it comes to such things. When I came here, I decided that if it isn't required and it isn't forbidden, I don't care. Two of our three sites do pass the bulletin out (or leave it about for the taking) at the beginning of Mass, one hands it out only upon leaving church. There are other liturgical anomalies singular to individual sites: putting the collection into the baskets in the front of the congregation at St. Ambrose, ringing the bells during Mass at St. James, and bringing the gifts all the way up to the altar and not just to the foot of the sanctuary at St. John's. We do want to have a workshop session for each of our liturgical ministries in the year ahead, so maybe the bulletin point can be covered at that time. There are also various emergency procedures to be reviewed as we priests learned while at our annual Convocation with the bishop several weeks ago. We also need to recruit more ushers, especially for the 5:00 P.M. Mass. But our Time-Talent-Treasure time approaches next month, so hopefully....

Is there a way to promote more quiet before Masses? When the choir practices before Mass in church, others simply talk louder as needed. Also, there's too much talking in the small chapel at St. John's. Is there any more respect for the tabernacle? It almost seems like a work space. Thank you.

As pastor, I dasn't come out and say "Shut up!" lest that be the last time we see that person in church. Our seasonal appeal for pre-Mass quiet in Lent does seem to work. Perhaps some gentle signage throughout the year may help. And, of course, you yourselves are certainly able to let your neighbor know some quiet would be appreciated. Do know, though, that the church is also where we meet the Lord in one another, and the building of what the Church calls "koinonia" or community often occurs on Sunday mornings when people meet one another prior to the liturgy. One suggestion would be to come earlier to church to enjoy some

quiet time with the Lord. Then, as others arrive, be welcoming, especially to ones who appear to be new to that Mass. Maybe, then, they'll even come back.

It seems that the parish has been doing a lot to increase Spanish in the Mass and we now have Fr. Carlos. Has there been any increase in Spanish-speaking people in the parish?

Looking at the parish roster, there are about 3 dozen families with what appear to be Latino surnames, and we have had each year the addition of new Hispanic families on the rolls of the school. When a church takes the relatively minor step of singing at least a few verses of an occasional hymn in Spanish, then perhaps when such individuals may visit our church on Sunday, they will feel welcome enough to join. Spanish-speaking individuals form the largest growing component of the Church in the U.S.; and in some neighborhoods only one parish away, they are in the majority. Indeed, St. Francis Xavier Cabrini parish is holding its *Encuentro* wrap-up assembly here in Dailey Hall because they do not have a large-enough facility to accommodate the large Latino-Hispanic presence expected. I'm sure some of their participants actually live in *our* parish. Our main emphasis on Spanish in the liturgy is from mid-September to mid-October which is Hispanic Culture Awareness Month each year. We also have the Italian St. Lucy's Mass and dinner, the Irish culture celebration around the time of St. Patrick's Day, and occasionally celebrations of other cultures as individuals and groups may come forth. As Pentecost approaches, it is a good reminder that we are a universal Church, and anything we can do to expand our own horizons and welcome Catholics who are different from ourselves only in language and ethnicity will help to keep the footprint of our Church from shrinking too precipitously. Indeed, I just finished reading yesterday a new book, *Gold From The Well: The Inspiring True Account of a Haitian Refugee* by Jocelyn "Josh" Apo, one of our parishioners from Haiti. In it, he gives mention to us as his church, and when we read about what he went through to get here, all of our own problems will melt to insignificance, and we'll truly see the value in being a welcoming community to new people of all different cultures and languages living in our midst. Our Adult Faith Community will be conducting a book study of this book this summer. Hope you can attend.

What is the strangest thing that you experienced while on the altar?

The Transubstantiation. But, other than that, one of the strangest was one of the most beautiful. It was when I was at my first assignment at St. Monica's. The sacristan forgot to put the corporal on the credence table for the server to put on the altar at Offertory time. The server that day was a young boy who had Downs Syndrome. Unhesitatingly, he took the linen scarf off the credence table and, voila, it became the corporal on the altar just like that. Had I myself been serving,

I would have held up the Mass by traipsing back to the sacristy to find the drawer with the corporals in them and then traipsing back to the altar (which, in St. Monica's, is a long walk). Strange, but very, very beautiful.

What do you consider your 3 greatest accomplishments?

Chronologically, in 1993, Fr. Lee Chase was assigned to St. Mary's in Auburn as the successor of the late Fr. Pat Sullivan as Parochial Vicar. As we looked over the church at that time, we saw need for fixing up several things. Well, this developed into a full-blown renovation. At the end, we produced a most beautiful church which still serves the congregation there for all its services, and a remodeled church hall which has housed since that time a monthly Pasta Supper which has been both a community-builder and a fundraiser for the parish. That was the first significant accomplishment I experienced as a pastor.

Second was when I came here. The work of the Inter Parish Advisory Team (IPAT) which was done prior to the arrival of Fr. Bob Werth and me in June of 2004 truly paved the way for what I believe has been one of the smoothest transitions from multiple separate parishes to one new consolidated parish. Indeed, this 2nd accomplishment was far more due to the collaborative efforts of IPAT and our awesome staff members and our also-awesome parishioners than to anything I could have done just coming in to try to make this all come together. Indeed, such inspiration has enabled us to branch out even further in collaboration with one of our newer affiliations: Roc ACTS (Association of Communities Transforming Society). Together with numerous other church communities and agencies, we have addressed the significant issues of the day as they have particularly affected the poor. Tomorrow afternoon, from 3:30 to 5:00, they are holding their Sustainer Challenge and Reception in our St. John's Hall. There is free party food, chances to win gift baskets, and a silent auction. Hope to see you there!

The third greatest accomplishment was the campaign we had for some big-ticket items: roofs, boilers, and parking lots. The goal was pretty high (\$900,000), and I remember some folks saying we would never make it, but the generosity of you all put us all the way up to \$1,050,000 by the time all was said and done. You have been very generously responsive when needs were there. Even our relatively minor Increased Offertory Campaign last year was able to wipe out all those negative variances we used to see in the bulletin week after week. Our various Councils (for Finances, Pastoral items, and School) have guided me and motivated many to keep our parish with its three churches and a wonderful school very visible as the presence of the Church, the very Body of Christ, in our neighborhoods stretching from I-490 to Norton Street and from Irondequoit Bay to our boundaries with wonderful St. Francis Xavier Cabrini Parish to the west. Indeed, we have been a parish to which both Bishop Clark and Bishop Matano

have desired to send young seminarians and the newly ordained to get good first-hand experience of a parish that, even amidst what some would consider to be big obstacles, is able to thrive with the resources (both human and fiscal) at hand.

What 3 things do you regret over the past 10 years?

Over the past ten years, anything which I have regretted I have also tried to allow to spur me on to address in the best possible way. Chronologically, the first thing I have regretted is allowing the administrative details of such a complex parish to claim so much of each day. It can be very easy to stay at the desk in my office all day (and the desk in my study at the rectory on my day off), and although I may get a lot of paperwork done, there are people I could be out pastorally visiting—and rest that I could be necessarily getting on that day off—if the pile in my Inbox were not so chained to my wrist. In response, though, I have pulled back a bit from unnecessary duplicative recordkeeping of my own doing (even though it may from time to time lengthen my search for needed information), and I have tried not to even look at e-mail on my day off so that I can get that rest and spend some time with crazy friends as I recharge for the week ahead.

A second thing I have regretted is the diminishing number of people in church on Sundays. Obviously when 930 people die, there's bound to be some vacancies in the pews. Others moved to the suburbs or out of town, some have changed parishes for a variety of reasons, and still others no longer go to church at all. While I know this is not unique to Peace of Christ, I always wonder what more could I have done or should I even now be doing. In a joint effort to address similar needs in many parishes, the diocese is now orienting parish staffs from a number of parishes in an evangelization outreach called "Christ Life." Indeed, last night and most of today, we were all gathered together out at Guardian Angels Church for an orientation to this process, and my hope is that as many as possible will become fully engaged in it when we roll it out later this year. There are plenty of formerly practicing Catholics for our focus, let alone those who just have never had anybody who invited them to their church because it somehow involved stepping out of their comfort zone. I pray we will be blessed in this effort.

And the third thing I regret was having to cancel the Monday morning Mass at Cedarwood back in July of 2015 at the beginning of my 12th year here at Peace of Christ. Every Monday since I arrived here in 2004, I had celebrated a 10:00 A.M. Mass at Cedarwood Towers on Main Street. When I began, there were at least a good dozen people who would regularly attend. Over the years, some would move to assisted living facilities, some would die, and some would just become too frail to come down to the Mass. New people moving in—even with invitations which we extended—either were not Catholic or did not attend Mass regularly. In the end, there was only one person, and she was the one who set up

for the Mass and was by-and-large able to get out on Sundays to attend Mass at church. However, this *did* open up the opportunity for me to say a monthly convent Mass for our large community of Sisters in St. Ambrose Convent (I believe that, since the closing of Nazareth Convent on Lake Avenue, it is the largest convent numbers-wise outside of the motherhouse on French Road).

Have you ever gotten to church and forgot your homily? If you did, what did you do? If you didn't, what would you have done?

There have been a couple of times when either I forgot or mislaid my text or notes for my homily. However, at 39 years now a priest, I have gone through all three years of the 3-year cycle of Sunday readings 13 times. And having at least done the preparation of the homily, I usually can remember the main points I wanted to make and be able to deliver a cohesive, if not shortened, homily. Indeed, back in St. Andrew's Seminary High School (which I graduated from 50 years ago next month—and our class is having its 50th year reunion on June 15th back at our school facility which is now the Diocesan Pastoral Center)—in our public speaking course, we had to give an impromptu speech in front of our class. The teacher would have us go to the front of the room, he would then give us a topic, and we would have to make up something to say on the spot and give a speech right there and then. That teacher, Mr. Franklin Kamp (who went on to teach at McQuaid when our high school seminary closed) will be at our reunion (and I fully intend to get even with him at that time☺).

Well, those are all the questions that were submitted. We have a few minutes for any additional questions from the floor if anyone has any to ask. (PAUSE & RESPOND). Well, thank you very much. As we are now only in the first week of our 2nd decade as “Peace of Christ Parish,” my hope is that when someone may stand here ten years from now to deliver a 20-year report, all of our evangelization efforts will have been successful in growing the parish and filling our pews, that our wonderful St. John Neumann School will continue to be educating the most diverse and well-rounded student body in the Catholic School system in ways that will not only make them smart but also compassionately wise in dealing with life and the people of their world of the mid-21st century, and that our support of the parish via our regular annual commitments of our Time, Talent, and Treasure will have remained apace with inflation to enable us to stay strong as the Body of Christ serving eastern Rochester, lower Irondequoit, and all those who are a part of us from Webster and the many adjoining suburbs and neighborhoods of our beloved city. The *bottom*, bottom line though is: It's all about Jesus! If all of what we do is not leading us closer to Jesus and Jesus closer to us, then we are on the wrong track. Let's be sure to keep Jesus as our focus, always! Thank you.