

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday per Annum - B  
Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46;  
I Corinthians 10:31-11:1;  
Mark 1:40-45  
Little Flower - 2/14/21

My Brothers and Sisters,

The Parish Staff and I want to wish all of you a Happy Valentine's Day. Today we celebrate the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time and World Marriage Day.

For the people of Jesus' time, family and community were everything. Therefore, lepers were essentially the living dead because they had to live apart from their family and community. In his First Letter, St. John wrote that one "*who does not love is among the living dead*" [3:14; NAB, 1970]. In today's Gospel, Jesus mirrors compassionate love for the leper. He not only restores the man's physical health but, more importantly, gives him back his family and his community. When we love others, we are life giving. We give or enhance their capacity to love and to be loved.

Every year we present to you our parish Stewardship and Accountability Report. It is included with today's bulletin.

As we all know, this has been a year unlike any previous year in our lifetimes. Just as the pandemic has had a major impact on us as individuals and as families, it also has had a major impact on us as a parish. For example, we had no in-person Masses from Wednesday, March 18, until Tuesday, May 19, when parishioners could again attend weekday Masses.

At the same time, we have much for which to be grateful. First, I cannot tell you how grateful I am to all of you for continuing to support Little Flower so faithfully even when you are not attending Mass. Although our Sunday collection income has decreased, up to this point, the decrease has not impacted our ability to continue our ministries. It should be noted, however, that we have been blessed with extra contributions by some generous members of our community.

Second, we have to be grateful to the staff for enabling us to adjust to the new realities of the pandemic. For example, it did not take us long to begin to offer live-streamed Masses on Sundays and some weekdays. Initially, the camera was Angie Mackell's cell phone. Thanks to a grant from the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, we were able to purchase equipment to live stream the Mass more effectively. Likewise, we have printed worship aids for each Sunday Mass for use both in church and at home. Also, we had to develop safety protocols for church which included sanitizing after each Mass. Initially a dedicated group of you, who also served as greeters, accepted that responsibility. As time went on, we hired high school students who have faithfully continued our sanitizing protocols. Peggy Clegg started calling people rather than visiting them. Lisa Gibbons developed protocols for last year's RCIA and RCIC group to receive the sacraments of initiation and for our First Communicants to receive First Reconciliation and First Eucharist in small groups instead of as a class. Tom Costello implemented a ticketing system to facilitate attendance at Christmas Masses and formed "mini-choirs" and used instrumentalists to maintain a small amount of our Christmas traditions.

Third, our various Commissions and Committees continued serving the parish. The Athletic Commission successfully implemented safety protocols to allow practices and games for all sports and hosted several tournaments. Through the Christopher Ministry, homebound parishioners resumed receiving Communion when restrictions were lifted, and cards were sent weekly to a homebound parishioner. Through your generosity, our St. Vincent de Paul Society helped families at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The Ladies Club presented a check to the parish to help with parish expenses in addition to collecting money for flowers for Easter, Christmas, and our Novena. Members donated socks stuffed with soap, shampoo, and toothbrush and toothpaste for the homeless. Members of the Men's Club worked hard this past year keeping our grounds in order, along with many of the parishioners involved in the Green Thumb ministry. The *Invite* Commission sponsored a nine-week study of the Book of Romans

with 35 participants, a mask and hand sanitizer distribution, and three pop-up food pantries for the community. The parish council added four new at-large members and chose new officers.

Our school teachers managed in-person and virtual learning. Last spring, they had to transition from all in-person to all e-learning with no preparation time. In August the school reopened in person in all grades with an e-learning option. The teachers revised the virtual schedule to increase productivity and accountability. Theresa Slaton and Gary Asher were recently recognized by the Archdiocese for teaching in Catholic schools 46 and 40 years respectively. The school maintained a B grade from the state due to excellent student growth. We added a bilingual Parent Involvement Educator in Mary Rodriguez. Finally, we progressed to 1:1 technology equipment in grades K-8.

Finally, even in the midst of the pandemic, we were able to make several major improvements. Construction is almost completed on the new handicapped-accessible entrance and bathrooms in the parish center. This project was made possible by a generous bequest of a parishioner. A new HVAC system was installed in the rectory to provide supplementary heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. I am so grateful. What is most remarkable about this project is how it came to be. The proceeds from last summer's Summerfest 2020 were earmarked for this project. When the festival was canceled, someone suggested that we invite parishioners simply to donate the amount of money they would have spent at the festival. The project was named *Chillin' with Fr. Bob*. To be honest, I thought we might receive \$5,000 in donations, perhaps even \$10,000. Again, you were so generous. We received \$53,000 in the midst of the pandemic! The school received new, safer classroom doors. We also installed a new telephone system and key system.

Where do we go from here? Our biggest challenge will be to return to pre-pandemic (or greater) levels of Mass attendance and volunteerism, which will require us to find ways to engage and connect with parishioners beyond Mass and volunteer opportunities. Second, this year we saw the first decrease in school enrollment in 10 years. We will have to work harder to retain current students and recruit new students especially in the lower grades. We are asking all of you to be ambassadors for our school. Third, if we want to continue to thrive, we will have to increase our evangelization and re-evangelization efforts and our community outreach.

We are presenting this report today in anticipation of Stewardship Sunday at the end of the month. Therefore, I want to say a few words the financial state of our parish. Again we have much for which to be grateful. This past fiscal year our total income exceeded our total expenses. We are extremely grateful for extra contributions received from many of you during the pandemic to help make up for losses, including some who sent their stimulus money. Likewise, we are extremely grateful to those who continued to contribute regularly throughout the pandemic by mailing in their weekly contributions or utilizing our online payment system. As I already mentioned, *Chillin' with Fr. Bob* raised over \$53,000. Likewise, contributions made by several parishioners made up for losses incurred from the cancellation of the fish fry last year. These contributions put our net income for the fish fry ahead of the previous year. On the other hand, our average weekly collection remains under budget, even though we lowered the Sunday collection budget by \$550 per week or \$28,600 annually for this fiscal year.

One caution. When you look at our financial report, you will see that we have a sizeable income surplus. It would easy to conclude that we are in excellent financial shape. However, this is not true. Our thank you letters to donors inform them that their gifts will be used for capital expenses. Therefore, they cannot and should not be used for day-to-day operations, and they should never be used to fund deficit spending.

My brothers and sisters, as I once again thank you for your wonderful generosity and support, in preparation for Stewardship Sunday on February 27-28, I would also invite you to consider your stewardship of time, i.e., time given to God, talent, i.e., talents shared with the community, and treasure, i.e., your financial support of our parish and the ministries of our parish and other charities. As Archbishop Tobin often said, stewardship is "what you do, with what you have, when you believe in God."