

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday per Annum - C  
Jeremiah 17:5-8;  
I Corinthians 15:12, 16-20;  
Luke 6:17, 20-26  
Little Flower - 2/13/22

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time and World Marriage Day. Therefore, at the end of Mass, we will offer a special blessing for all married and engaged couples.

In today's first reading, Jeremiah wrote, *"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose hope is the LORD. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream..."* In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul locates the basis of our hope in Christ's resurrection and the promise of our own resurrection. As Christians, we are called to be a people of hope. However, we live that hope in the here and now in our families, our parish, and our community.

Every year we present to you our parish Stewardship and Accountability Report. It is included with today's bulletin. I really would encourage you to study the report carefully.

When the fiscal year began on July 1, 2020, most of us thought the pandemic would be behind us by the end of the year. Obviously that did not happen. The good news is that as a parish we were able to do our part to carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus at Little Flower. Therefore, we have much for which to be grateful. Although the New Testament contains several images of the Church, I believe that Little Flower above all is a family.

Although there was a slight decrease in the number of parishioners, overall our numbers have remained steady. However, the number of new families registering decreased significantly while the number of families inactivated increased. At the same time, this year Little Flower School opened with eight more students than the previous year.

As the report states, "Little Flower Parish remains in sound financial condition thanks in large part to your ongoing generosity." However, our Sunday and Holyday income was \$11,000 under budget even though we had lowered our Sunday and Holyday income budget from the prior year. Compared to the prior year, our Sunday and Holyday income was \$44,008 lower. This is very concerning! The net deficit of \$150,472 is due in large part to capital expenditures using money that is not part of ordinary income. Also, most of the Paycheck Protection Loan was forgiven.

Little Flower Parish and School had a series of solid accomplishments this past calendar year. After the pandemic shutdown of Masses, our average attendance increased throughout most of the year. Our adult choir and youth choir returned in the Fall of 2021 with choirs wearing face coverings for safety purposes. With a slightly smaller version of our annual Christmas choir, our Christmas season Liturgies were outstanding! At the same time, we have maintained high-quality live-streaming for those still not comfortable with in-person attendance.

The pace of parish life picked up throughout the year. Little Flower hosted the second-most financially successful Summerfest in its history, with profits exceeding \$76,000. The Parish Life Commission sponsored the parish picnic, Halloween Party, Christmas Party and Soup Supper. The Stewardship Commission once again hosted the Parish Appreciation Brunch in conjunction with the feast of St. Therese.

Likewise, our many ministries continued to serve our parishioners and others in need. Though the Christopher Ministry, homebound parishioners received Communion and weekly bulletins throughout the year. Members of the Gabriel Project gave material assistance to 67 women and assisted 4 women with various forms of monetary support. Ten women were referred to the Catholic Charities' Christmas Store, and two were helped with Christmas gifts for their children. Through your generosity, our St. Vincent de Paul Society helped families at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Throughout the year, many families were assisted with paying utilities, received gas cards or household appliances, and/or were assisted with rent money. Also, bags of food were given as needed. Our participation with the IU HealthCare Network is in its second year. In addition to weekly phone calls, members have assisted IU Health patients meet other needs, for example, with a wheel chair ramp.

With the availability of Formed, the *Invite* Commission has organized multiple study groups, including the widely acclaimed *The Search*. With the cooperation of the Little Flower Neighborhood Association, Little Flower School, and the entire parish, Commission members and others distributed food from the steps of the church to the food-deprived of our area. Non-perishable food and baby items as well as household supplies were collected and donated to the Shepherd Community Center to benefit the needy on the Greater Eastside. The *Invite* Commission also hosted Neighborhood Night Out in August.

The Ladies Club and Men's Club continued their faithful service to the parish. Besides social activities, through their fund-raising efforts, the Ladies Club presented me with a check 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, toothbrush, and toothpaste for the homeless. Along with social outings, members of the Men's Club worked hard this past year keeping our grounds in order. Their efforts were aided by parishioners involved in the Green Thumb ministry. Men's Club members hosted the weekly Fish Fry on Fridays during Lent with all the proceeds turned over to the parish. They assisted with putting up and taking down Christmas decorations in church.

Remarkably Little Flower School raised over \$280,000 for a new STEM lab in school, which includes \$195,000 in specified restricted donations. The school hired an instructional coach, two additional resource teachers, and two additional classroom aides in school through the government's EANS program. This year Little Flower School founded the PPS (Parish, Parents, School) as a newer version of our PTO to build closer ties between Parish and School.

At the same time, we face several significant challenges. The first and most important is to increase Sunday Mass attendance to pre-pandemic or better levels. Even on those Sundays when attendance is at its best, our weekly attendance is still only  $\frac{2}{3}$  of what it was pre-pandemic. The Christianity of Jesus is a Christianity of community. Watching live streamed Masses does not fulfill our obligation to attend Sunday Eucharist. I am hopeful that as Lent begins in a few weeks many more will take that opportunity to return to in-person Mass attendance.

Our second biggest challenge is to increase the number of parishioners, particularly younger adults, volunteering for parish ministries, especially in ministries that are few in number. For example, all the Gabriel Project and all the St. Vincent de Paul Society volunteers are older than I am, and I am two years past priest retirement age. If these ministries are going to continue, we need more volunteers and younger volunteers. Please note that I am not asking those who are already highly committed to do more. Also, since the pandemic began, I am noticing that some of our volunteers in various ministries do not seem to be as committed as they were in carrying out their ministries. In other words, we need to become more engaged and to engage more members.

Our third challenge is to increase Sunday giving to meet our Sunday Collection budget. I am extremely grateful for all you have done to support the parish through the pandemic. However, going forward, we need the financial support of all parishioners. Also, if you are able to increase your giving, we will very much appreciate that.

Little Flower School is facing two critical challenges that are not under our control. First, as you may have read or heard, there is a shortage of teachers throughout the country. This year we were not able to fill all of our available positions. The second challenge is that the salaries of Catholic school teachers lag significantly behind their public school counterparts. With the shortage of teachers and lower salaries, it will be more challenging for Catholic schools, including Little Flower, to hire and retain the best teachers.

My brothers and sisters, if we expect to have a vibrant and thriving parish in the post-pandemic world, it is going to take all of us to energetically throw ourselves into that effort. I am not sure how much more the parish staff and I can do to convince people to return to weekly Mass attendance or to encourage parishioners to volunteer for our various ministries. Several weeks ago the governor and health commissioner came to the conclusion they probably were no longer effective in convincing people to get vaccinated. Instead they appealed to average citizens to talk to those close to them and enlist their help. We may be in a similar position. Therefore, I am asking you to talk to people whom you know who are not attending Mass and to talk directly to people whom you know about sharing their time and talent. We want to once again become the vibrant, thriving parish that we were pre-pandemic.