

31<sup>st</sup> Sunday per Annum - C  
Wisdom 11:22-12:2;  
II Thessalonians 1:1-2:2;  
Luke 19:1-10  
Little Flower - 10/30/22

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's reading from the Book of Wisdom, we are reminded that God loves all things that exist and that if God ceased to love anyone or anything, it would cease to exist. We are also told that God has mercy on all. That mercy is exemplified in the story in today's Gospel when God chose to visit the home of the tax collector Zacchaeus. Finally, Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians is the Church's prayer for us: "*we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith....*"

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. The last several years we have presented it in February in conjunction with our parish stewardship drive. By that time, however, we are already more than half way through the current fiscal year. This year, therefore, we thought it would be best to share it with you closer to the end of the fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2022.

We have much for which to be grateful. In numbers, the parish has remained stable. From July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022, 34 new families registered in the parish compared to 19 families the previous year. However, the total number of parishioners declined by 26. In the report, you will notice that the numbers of adults and children who received sacraments for the first time declined. On a more positive note, at the Easter Vigil, eight individuals, including two children, became Catholic.

As the report states, "Little Flower Parish remains in sound financial condition thanks in large part to your ongoing generosity." Sunday contributions for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2022 increased by approximately \$5,800, but remained under budget by approximately \$5,300. However, because of careful fiscal management, our operating income exceeded our operating expenses by approximately \$35,000.

In addition, we were blessed with a large amount of extraordinary and restricted income for capital projects. For example, we resealed the parking lot this past May. A generous grant helped us replace the gym floor with a new wooden floor in September. We began construction of a new STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) lab in school. Construction is expected to be completed next month. To increase school safety, we installed four new exterior doors and added electronic features to six exterior doors of the school.

Little Flower Parish and School had a series of solid accomplishments this past fiscal year. Average attendance at Sunday Mass is increasing slowly. This year adult choir began their new choir season without masks. The choir added four new members after experiencing some loss in numbers due to some not returning or choosing to "retire" post-pandemic.

As a parish, we were very active during the last fiscal year. We planned and achieved the most financially successful Summerfest in its history, with profits exceeding \$83,000. These monies will be used to replace the Parish Center roof.

Our Parish Life Commission sponsored a parish picnic, Halloween Party, Advent Family Night, Christmas Party, and Soup Supper. The *Invite* Commission continued to offer ongoing courses and seminars and movie nights, including, for example, studies on the Mystery of the Eucharist and Forgiveness (a discussion on the sacrament of Reconciliation). The afternoon group enjoyed viewing and discussing two seasons of *The Chosen*, the popular TV series on the life of Christ. At the request of the *Invite* Commission, Little Flower junior high students designed holy cards featuring drawings of St. Therese with Mass times and a prayer on the back to be distributed at all parish events and made available at the Church doors.

The parish has also continued to reach out to those with spiritual and material needs. Through the Christopher Ministry, homebound parishioners received Communion throughout the year, and cards were sent weekly to homebound parishioners. Weekly bulletins were mailed to our homebound parishioners as well.

With the help of parishioners, school families, and neighbors, the *Invite Commission* donated a truckload of food and household items to the Shepherd Community Center. Members of the Gabriel Project gave material assistance to 80 women ranging from full layettes to diapers and clothing. Through your generosity, our St. Vincent de Paul Society helped families and nursing home residents at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Many

families were assisted with paying utilities, received gas cards or household appliances, and/or were assisted with rent money. Bags of food and grocery gift cards were also provided as needed. Members of the Ladies Club donated socks stuffed with soap, shampoo, toothbrushes, and toothpaste for the homeless.

Through their fundraising efforts, the Ladies' Club presented me with a generous check to help with parish expenses. They also collected money for flowers for Easter, Christmas, and our Novena. Besides enjoying social outings, members of the Men's Club, along with parishioners involved in the Green Thumb ministry, kept our grounds in order. The Men's Club also hosted the weekly Friday Fish Fry during Lent. They assisted with decorating the church for Christmas and also with taking down the decorations after the Christmas season.

Under the leadership of the School Commission, Little Flower School resumed their 8th grade trip to Gettysburg and Washington D.C. As a spring musical, the school performed *Matilda, Jr.* Also, field trips, class parties, and many other Little Flower traditions returned. The school established a PPS (Parish, Parents, School) Organization in place of the PTO to include parishioners and to build closer ties between school and parish.

Looking forward, the Parish Council was invited by the Archdiocese to respond to the 10 categories that will be discussed at the Synod of Bishops next year. Council members discussed topics in depth and provided a response to the Archdiocese. The Council also began the process of re-evaluating our parish strategic goals to ensure that we remain relevant and in touch with the current needs of our community. Finally, the Council has continued to focus on encouraging parishioners to return to Mass.

At the same time as we celebrate our accomplishments, the parish is faced with several serious challenges. Many of these are listed in the report. I would like to highlight four broad challenges.

As we have been saying repeatedly, the Eucharist is and must be the source and summit of parish life. Sunday Eucharist is the most important thing we do as a parish.

- Although our numbers have been increasing slowly in recent months, on average only  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the number of people attend Sunday Eucharist as attended before the pandemic. In other words, we are still missing 125-150 people each week. Many people have returned to Mass, but they have not returned consistently. We all need to recommit to weekly attendance at Sunday Eucharist. I would encourage all of us to make it our personal goal to invite four people to return to Mass.
- Tom Costello will be retiring soon. It will be a major challenge to find a new music director who will enable our excellent liturgical music program to continue and develop.
- We need to encourage more people to become or return to serving as Eucharistic ministers. Current ministers are being over-scheduled. Also head Eucharistic ministers are small in number, particularly on Sunday evening.

We need more parishioner engagement in parish life, both in participating and volunteering. This is your parish. We need everyone to have a sense of ownership and responsibility for the parish. Our challenge is to encourage involvement and participation in our ministries with so many other demands on our time and energy. Some ministries are run by one or two people, and many of them are over the age of 70. Younger volunteers are needed in many areas. One particular example is our St. Vincent de Paul Society.

We are facing educational challenges in our school and religious education program.

- School enrollment, which declined slightly during Covid, has not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Charter and private school options continue to expand, giving parents more choices.
- We are facing continued school staffing challenges, especially since Catholic school teacher salaries are significantly lower than their public school counterparts.
- Fewer families of public school parents are taking advantage of Sunday morning religious education for their children.

Our final challenge is financial. I cannot tell you how much I have appreciated your continued support of the parish since the pandemic began. However, as you know better than I, inflation is driving up the cost of everything. Many people, including perhaps many of you, are hurting financially. Many people expect a recession sometime in the next few months. If inflation continues to increase and our income decreases, this will be a major challenge for us. I can only ask that we all do our best to support the parish in these challenging times.

Thank you for continuing to attend Sunday Eucharist and for supporting the parish with your time, talent, and treasure.