

State of the Unity Address
January 31, 2011
Very Rev. Gary Meier, V.F.

I decided a couple of weeks ago that I would give a State of Unity Address to the parish this weekend. I did so in part because President Obama gave his State of the Union Address this past Tuesday. I don't know if you caught that or not, but he is a great speaker. His address was just over an hour – my address won't be quite as long. I've never given a State of the Unity Address before, but in many ways, I think it's over due. I've divided the address up into three sections. The first one addresses the overall financial stability of the parish, dealing mostly with the income of the parish. The second area addresses the overall membership of the parish and finally, the third area addresses the future of the parish.

So, first, let's look briefly at the overall financial stability of the parish. There has always been a lot of chatter around the parish about our financial stability. It seems an awful lot of energy and time is given to how we are going to pay the bills. So, I did a little bit of research and comparison of our financial statements for the past seven years to see if we can gather any information about where we have been financially and where we might be going. I've also asked the finance council to prepare an income statement that compares the last seven years. That statement is available in the back of church if anyone is interested and will be posted on our parish website.

Well the first thing you see by looking at our revenues is that there has been one significant change in our revenues over the past seven years, and that is we are no longer receiving a large sum of money each year from Mrs. Roberts. You may recall that Mrs. Roberts was an individual who gave a large sum of money each year to help out our parish. I have to be honest with you, from a fiscal perspective that has always worried me, the fact that in the past, our parish budget was so dependent on one person's generosity. You may recall that Mrs. Roberts passed away in 2007, which was the last time we received her donation.

And since then, a couple of things have happened that have allowed us to become more financially stable and viable as a parish. The first is we have increased our overall fundraising efforts. In the past seven years, we have done a better job with our fundraising as a parish. However, it's true that some of our fundraising has remained constant. For example, our work at the Dome remains a viable and steady income to the parish. Secondly, what we call the "Turkey" money continues to remain an effective stream of revenue. And in addition to that, we have added to our fundraising efforts with an increase in the fish fries, an Annual Dinner Auction and Concert and what I call the "Ham" letters, which is a direct mail effort. All of this combined, has increased the overall fundraising efforts of our parish which helped us to become a more financially viable and stable parish.

Another thing that has changed in the past seven years is that our rental income has increased, mostly due to the rental income we now receive from Crisis Nursery Outreach

Center. And finally, we continue to look for ways to save money by not spending money. I think this is one of the most significant things we've done to present a more stable and balanced budget, because what that means is this, we have to work together to save money. For example, on Christmas Eve, rather than hiring a snow removal company, about seven or eight parishioners came early to mass to help Ron Johnson clear the snow from the parking lot and walkways. It means that instead of buying a whole lot of potted plants each Christmas and Easter, we buy some and mix them with the artificial plants that were donated several years ago. It means that the Christmas trees we use every year are held together with duck tape, but I think we can get one more year out of them. It means that we use donated vestments, chalices and altar cloths as opposed to going out and buying new ones. It means we decided not to replace Bert in the office when she retired a few years ago. And there are countless other examples of how we have reduced the overall spending at the parish. Any one item wouldn't make a huge difference in the budget, but collectively it makes a big difference. The sacrifices we make collectively to reduce the overall expenses of the parish, in part allows us to be more fiscally responsible and stable.

But there are a couple of other things reflected in the income comparison report worth mentioning. Around the time Mrs. Roberts passed away, three new individuals came forward to help assist with our overall expenses at the parish. These are individuals who know our story, they know our financial struggles, and they know the difference this parish is making in the lives of many others. All three want to remain anonymous, none of them were solicited and all three came forward independently of one another to help our parish. I bring it up to you for this reason; financially speaking, it makes a big difference in the overall budget when you're not dependent on any one person's generosity. It allows us to be more financially stable than we were in the past.

And finally, as I looked at the overall financials for the past several years, something else stood out in the report. And that is this; for the past several years, our collections, our weekly offertory has remained the same. And that to me speaks volumes about the commitment we have made to one another and to our parish. Other pastors I know are reporting a decrease in their overall collections of about 10 – 15% in recent years due to the recession. That has not been the case here at Sts. Teresa & Bridget. Our collections remain the same. They've remained within a few hundred dollars of each other from year to year. What surprised me about that was this; I totally expected to see a decrease in collections for the past few years, but there hasn't been. And I think we can be proud of the sacrifice we've made and continue to make, which is represented in our offertory.

In summary, we have become a more financially stable parish, due to the increase in fundraising, increase in rent, and decrease in spending and new friends of Sts. Teresa & Bridget, who have come forward in recent years.

After I looked at the financials, I began to look at our membership roster. This is quite a bit more challenging as it's difficult to get accurate data going back seven years. But, using the pictorials and the database in the office, you can get an overall look at our parish membership. I began by putting together a list of people who were once registered

at Sts. Teresa and Bridget and who are no longer registered at our parish. The majority of these individuals are individuals who have moved without leaving a forwarding address. They've moved, out of state, out of the city, they've gone and we've been unable to locate them. The second largest are those who have passed away. We've had many parishioners pass away in the past seven years. And even though they've passed away, they are still faithful members of the parish, and I promise you, they're with us here today. And finally, there's a small group, it's hard to tell exactly how many, but I estimate that there's about 15-20 who have just stopped coming or have found another place to worship on Sundays. So, that's a brief look at the people who were once registered at Sts. Teresa & Bridget and are no longer registered.

But there is another list of people worth mentioning and those are the people who have registered in the parish since the merge. In the past seven years, over 90 people have registered at Sts. Teresa & Bridget. And about half of them are those who for whatever reason, did not register at the time of the merge, but are now registered at the parish. These are the individuals who have found their way home and back to the parish. They were once a member of St. Bridget or St. Teresa and have now found their way to Sts. Teresa & Bridget. And the other half of that group is people who are new to us. They have come to the parish on a Sunday or at some activity or a funeral and they have stayed with us, joined us and have become part of our family. In short, some people have left the parish and some people have joined the parish. And finally, there's a small group of parishioners who are what I call the next generation of parishioners. These are the individuals who at the time of the merge were listed as dependents of their parents and have since moved out on their own, or got married and are now active adult members of the parish. And while this number isn't huge, I think it's worth mentioning because it represents our future. So, in the past seven years, over ninety new members have registered as members of Sts. Teresa & Bridget Parish.

As I thought about this information for the past couple of weeks, here is what I think we can say about it. Looking at our financials and our membership, about the only thing we can say for sure is this; we are not the same parish as we were seven years ago – we have changed. And in my opinion, we have changed for the better. We have grown closer to one another as a parish. And I think we see ourselves more and more as Sts. Teresa & Bridget and not as St. Teresa or St. Bridget. The simple truth is we have grown closer as a parish family.

We have changed, we have grown and I think we have a lot to look forward to in the years to come. I think the future of our parish is contingent on two things. First, to put it simply, faithful attendance at mass or as I like to say "don't pass on mass." Maybe I'm old fashioned or maybe it's my seminary training, but without faithful attendance at mass, we don't have a future. A parish family who prays together stays together. The church teaches that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives. Christ teaches that if we are to become a Eucharistic people then we have to receive the Eucharist. We have to receive the Body of Christ in order to become the Body of Christ. It is the source of our unity. Don't get me wrong, we can build unity in all sorts of ways; by working together at our fish fries; by working together at the Dome; by working together through

the SVDP, the Breakfast with Santa; the Toy Sale; or any number of places and activities. But the source of that unity has to be faithful attendance at mass. It is the source of our unity and will help us grow closer together as the one Body of Christ. And I would like to offer all of us a challenge. If you don't see someone attending mass on a regular basis, give them a call and find out what's going on or if they need anything. If you notice someone absent, please take it upon yourself to call them for no other reason than to let them know they've been missed. Your phone call, your reaching out to someone can make a big difference. If someone who hasn't been here in a while knows that they are missed, it will make a big difference to them – trust me it will. So, please take it upon yourself to call someone if you haven't seen them in a while.

Secondly, we need to embrace evangelization as a parish. Evangelization was the scheduled topic at our last parish council meeting but didn't get discussed due to scheduling conflicts. It will be discussed by our council in the future. Evangelization is already being discussed in our diocese. There was a recent workshop hosted by our diocese and two of our parish members attended. Their goal will be to report to our parish council what they learned and help all of us embrace a spirit of evangelization. All of us, from the oldest member of the parish to the youngest member of the parish, need to embrace evangelization.

And when I say embrace evangelization, what I means is this; we need to embrace the attitude that what we have here is so good, so amazing that we just can't keep it to ourselves. Evangelization has to come from within us; it has to come from our desire to share the grace, the love and the fellowship that we have experienced. We cannot approach evangelization as an effort to increase our membership. That would be the wrong reason to evangelize. But instead, our efforts to evangelize must come from our desire to share God's love with one another. Our experience of God's love and grace is just too good to keep to ourselves and we want other people to experience it. We want others to know God's love, God's grace, God's forgiveness and mercy and we can go forth evangelizing and sharing God's love with other.

The one thing we can say for certain as we look at both our financial records and our membership records for the past seven years is; we are not the same parish we were seven years ago, we have changed. I'd like to end with a quote from JFK who one said, "The only thing we can count on is change. Those who only look to the past or the present will certainly miss the future." And I don't want anyone of us to miss the future of Sts. Teresa & Bridget Parish. It will take a lot of prayer, a lot of sacrifice and a lot of work on all our parts, but we can continue to grow together in our relationships of love with one another in this house of love.