

Address to the Parish of St. Francis Xavier, Mississauga, Ontario

By Rev. Robert E. O'Brien

NOVEMBER 8, 2009

It is more than a year ago that I came to St. Francis Xavier Parish. The time since has been valuable for me in learning more about the very large and diverse community of our parish family. I hope the year has provided you with a chance to get to know me and the other priests who are here to serve you.

Like any Christian community, our life together is centred on the person of Jesus Christ. Gathered in His name as His priestly people, we offer the Eucharistic sacrifice each Sunday – a little Easter.

At the end of the Eucharist each week you are sent out to live and proclaim our new life in Christ.

The Sunday Eucharist is the centre, it is the hub of the wheel, and the rest of our lives emanate from it. How fruitful our mission of proclaiming the Good News is, in our vocations of daily living, has something to do with how we support each other and form one another in the life of faith.

I would like to share with you some of the direction and vision for parish life over the coming months and years.

The Youth of the Parish

Some of you will have heard me say that half of the parishioners in this parish are 32 years of age or less. If you were born in 1977, by the time you were ten, personal computers and computer games were commonplace. If you were born in 1987, by the time you were ten, cellular telephones and the internet had become ordinary ways to communicate and obtain information. If you were born in 1997 and are twelve years old now, you have been growing up in a world that uses computers in every aspect of life. Throughout all the years since 1977 we have also been increasingly saturated with images, popular culture

and advertising. All these things suggest that we need to develop new ways of sharing and communicating the Good News.

If half of our parishioners are 32 years of age or less, then younger people need to be directly involved in the whole range of parish activities. The involvement of youth will include groups of young people but also connections to ministries, activities, committees, organizations and movements across all of parish life. We are a youthful parish. While we will become more of a parish for youth, it is more important that we are a parish with a youthful outlook on the possibilities for growing and sharing the fruits of our belief in the person of Jesus Christ.

Family Life

Many families are stretched by the requirements of work and family life. How can the parish be a place that nurtures and strengthens the vocations of all family members while not adding to the already long task lists of families?

I would hazard a guess that the majority of people in the pews on Sunday lead these kinds of busy lives. We can make our parish a place for people who like to come to meetings and activities. We could become a parish with activities every night where we see mostly the same people. Our goal, however, is not to keep people busy. We need to support as many people in the parish as we can in living out the Gospel fully. That's our mission to make Christ and the love of the Father for God's people alive in the world.

The person in the pew who is looking for support, but who can't come to many meetings is the person who is going to make the Gospel alive in our community and world.

Two Significant Pastoral Facts

So there are two important observations to make. Our parish is young and media savvy. Many of the parish's members lead busy lives and are committed to their faith. So, whatever we do, we will need to be mindful of these two realities.

Learning & Praying Together

The results of the survey taken last year are consistent with verbal requests often given to me. “Father, we need formation.” In particular, people have asked for opportunities to come to know, study and pray with the Bible.

Let’s look down the road in a visionary way. Imagine 3 or 4 Bible study groups operating simultaneously at locations around the parish. There might be a Bible study at one of our schools north of Highway 401, another one located more centrally, and a third down at one of the schools near Eglinton Avenue. In these gatherings you will meet some of your neighbours who live in the area around you. You will have a chance to share faith, strengthen each other, and grow together. Sometimes we come home from work and see no one in our own neighbourhood. We can plant the seeds of community in the rich soil of God’s living Word.

Supporting & Implementing a Pastoral Direction

The councils and committees of the parish will help us to grow more deeply together as a wider parish community.

Church law requires that each parish have a Finance Council. The law also prescribes its responsibilities. Like the Pastoral Council, the Finance Council is a source for consultation for the pastor. It does not determine parish policy. Its primary responsibility is to make sure that the money and material aspects of the parish’s administration are being carried out in accordance with federal, provincial, municipal and church requirements. I will be asking the Finance Council to assist in the setting up of an effective budgeting process. Through its subcommittees it will help to plan maintenance expenditures for the building, and develop strategies to strengthen the parish’s financial position. In short, the Finance Council will help me to be a good steward of the resources that you give for the support of the mission of the parish.

The Pastoral Council, will be a group of no more than 8 to 10 people who help me, Fr. Steve and Fr. Jose, to discern correctly the needs of the parish and to engage and develop the right resources to respond effectively. Each of us has gifts and talents. Some of us are called to

put them at the service of the parish's mission to help all to live the Gospel more fully.

The role of the Pastoral Council is not to direct the actions of the parish at all, but to allow the Gifts of the Holy Spirit to flourish. Because the community is so large, I will be asking each member of the Pastoral Council to chair a subcommittee or working group. Once pastoral priorities have been discerned, projects to advance the mission of the parish will be identified. Subcommittees will be formed and people with talents, skills and gifts that are oriented to these goals will be brought on board.

In Service of the Pastoral Mission of the Parish

What will that mean? We'll have to wait and see. But I think it will mean that much will be happening and hopefully the right things. That's good to pray about – pray that we act together as a parish family on the right things. Today's Gospel says:

*A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,
which are worth a penny.
Then he called his disciples and said to them,
"Truly I tell you, this poor widow put in more
than all those who are contributing to the treasury.
For all of them have contributed out of their abundance,
but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had,
all she had to live on."**

So our talents don't have to be large, flashy or super in any way. They just have to come from us – they have to be a real gift of ourselves. This does not always mean doing what we might choose, however – that too is part of our gift.

Painting a Picture

As big as our church is I expect within a year all our meeting rooms will be booked every evening. And this will still represent a small portion of the parish being engaged. School facilities will also be called on.

* Lectionary for Sundays and Solemnities. Copyright 2008, Concacan Inc. Gospel text for 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B. Text approved for liturgical use in Canada.

While we may wonder at the saturation of electronic media in the lives of young people, these technologies have become the ordinary means of communication. One in particular, the internet, now provides many ways to communicate.

Even young people can be overwhelmed. We float along on the bits of information that come from different sources: telephone, Facebook, TV, radio, satellite radio and so on. The call of the Gospel is to simplicity, but what will be the simplest way to communicate is becoming different for different people.

You have already heard of the sound engineering of our choirs which will begin to take place in the next month or two. The goal is simple; we need to hear each other clearly to participate more fully. Later a system of flat screens in the church will display the hymn number, name and hymn book.

The sound system in the hall will be upgraded to match the standard of the church. In the hallway outside the church, flat screens will replace bulletin boards and posters. And finally, I hope to purchase television equipment to develop video content for our website, televise worship for overflow seating in the hall, and provide video material to support educational and spiritual programs in the parish including sacramental preparation.

Over time, the website will develop into a wide-ranging resource where you will be able to find useful information and the homily of each priest, each week embedded in video file. Helpful content like how to pray with my children, or share faith with them, or explain one part of the faith or another will be ready to hand. It will be good to hear one of your own priests talk about topics relevant to your own challenges in living out the faith.

And what about nurturing the faith at home? Yes, the website, but also prayer books, devotional assists and other books and videos could be a helpful resource. The first project of the Finance Council will be to prepare to open a religious goods store in the room where our “Sunday” office is at present. It will have the added benefit of allowing people the opportunity to donate to the parish through debit. If you are under

30, you may never have seen and may never write a cheque. Both these things will be a service to the parish community.

People have asked me from time to time about the hall. Will we rent it out? The answer is yes and no. First, we need to think carefully about how much we are going to use the hall for parish activities. My current assessment is that as the parish becomes busier, the meeting space we have is going to become more precious and that precious asset should be used for the benefit of the whole community and in service of the parish's mission. The number of dates required to make the hall a significant source of revenue for the parish will compromise its availability for parish functions. Exactly under what circumstances the hall may be rented out is a matter I intend to discuss with the Pastoral Council.

The Eucharist

As I stated at the beginning of this address, the centre of our life at the parish is the person of Jesus Christ, and the hub around which that life orbits is the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.

You have hopefully noticed a few subtle changes made in the sacred space over the last year. Before Lent, we repositioned the Stations of the Cross, so that you can journey with Christ around the church as you meditate on His Passion. Recently, Fr. Steve has taken some initiatives to emphasize and beautify the outside and the inside of the Blessed Sacrament chapel where the tabernacle containing the Body of Christ is kept.

The focal point of the celebration of the Mass is the altar. The lectern is the place from which the Living Word of God is proclaimed.

In light of that, there is a topic that has been the subject of quiet chatter in the parish. After more than a year, it is time I said something publicly about the mural in the sanctuary.

It is not clear that the altar and lectern are the focal points in our sanctuary at present. The pastoral challenge will be to restore to the sanctuary the proper balance required by the Church itself.

I intend to undertake a process by which all of us can become more aware of the demands of the sacred space. Taking the necessary time,

we will work together to formulate a plan for the whole body of the Church and the sanctuary. To that end, we will work toward conceptual plans that can become a point of discussion. My own observation is that the best sacred art comes after some time of living and worshipping together. The important thing is to get a vision of where we are going and allow it to unfold organically.

My intention is to establish a way that the sanctuary, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in particular, and the church may be unified and linked more strongly. The chapel, for example, is often not noticed when people enter the church. The Stations of the Cross, quite different from the painting, are far too small in scale for the space. The lighting in the church is too harsh. It washes out our view of the large stained glass window.

Music in the space also needs to be thought of. Currently the choirs are at right angles to the congregation. Redesigning the choir area so that the choirs are at 45 degrees and at least partially facing the congregation will be a big acoustic help.

The parish is a large space. It can support acoustic instruments. Imagine someday having a concert grand piano, a pipe organ with arrays of pipes on the tall walls of the church, and a bursary program to fund musical education for our young parishioners.

I also intend to strengthen the bonds of our music ministers. In two years time, the parish will be celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. Some members of one of our organizations have already expressed a desire to put on a pageant. What about a small opera? Our anniversary is in Advent of 2011. There is a beautiful little opera with words in English based on the story of the Three Wise Men, called, Amahl and the Night Visitors by Giancarlo Menotti. It is only 45 minutes in length and does not require professional voices. With the musical gifts in our parish it could be a wonderful way to learn, pray and grow together.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

It is the spark of spiritual imagination that we need in the Church – Christ's Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is real. The light of the Gospel takes away from us the darkness of sin.

Give us the light we need, O Lord, to be faithful supports to each another in living out our vocations. May we offer you worthy sacrifice, which comes not from our abundance but from our very lives.

We have much to look forward to. Our parish is blessed with an abundance of gifts among us. It is my intention to pursue the vision of a parish community, large as we are, that cares for, nurtures, supports and challenges its members to share actively in the mission of the Church, and to express articulately in their individual vocations the new life we have received through the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

Each of us is important. We need each other, and collectively we need to be the community of faith, hope and love that God has willed us to be.

With these goals in view and with a steady "yes" to God's grace in the lives of each one of us, the fruits of our life in the Spirit will unfold in marvelous and unanticipated ways for many years into the future.