

My Brothers and Sisters,

According to Jesuit Father Francis Sullivan, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Christ are not the same. Although Jesus' coming planted the seed of the kingdom of God, the Kingdom of God will only be fully realized when Christ returns in glory. On the other hand, the kingdom of Christ is an already fully existing spiritual kingdom. Today's Preface describes the kingdom of Christ as "a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace." The kingdom of Christ, then, already reigns in our hearts but must be lived in our lives. We live the kingdom of Christ and make the kingdom of Christ real in the world by living the values that Jesus taught and lived.

Today, however, I want to present to you the State of the Parish report. This report covers July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. I would encourage you to review it carefully.

First of all, our statistics remain essentially the same. For example, on June 30, 2024, Little Flower had 1,923 individual members and 884 families compared to 1,932 individual members and 882 families on June 30, 2023. Sacramental statistics also remained essentially the same. Fourteen infants or minors were baptized. Nineteen individuals were buried from Little Flower. Four adults came through RCIA, and four couples were prepared for marriage.

We have much for which to be proud and much for which to be grateful. One again this year, total operating income exceeded operating expenses for the fiscal year. Sunday collections were favorable to budget for the fiscal year. Various fundraising efforts and generous donations allowed us to complete capital projects that would not have been possible with regular operating revenue. Once again, the parish planned and achieved a successful Summerfest with profits exceeding \$73,000 even though it rained almost all day and evening on Saturday.

We also made several significant improvements to the campus. An old girls' restroom at the north end of school was converted to two unisex accessible restrooms. This completes the renovation of all the school restrooms. Work began on replacing the Parish Center HVAC system. This work is almost completely finished. We now have comfortable heat and air conditioning, and we do not have pipes leaking. Over the last few years, we have replaced the HVAC systems in the school, the rectory, and now the parish center. Finally, the parish center kitchen was remodeled with new cabinets and appliances through the generosity of one parishioner.

The Liturgy Commission continued various efforts to boost Mass attendance to *at least* pre-pandemic levels. Parish growth and increased participation led to a 2.9% rise in weekly Mass attendance. However, weekly attendance is still down ~100 from pre-pandemic levels. On a positive note, seven new Eucharistic ministers and three head ministers were added, and we were able to return to six cups at all weekend Masses.

Little Flower continues to answer the call of Pope Francis to serve those in need both within the parish and in the neighborhood. Members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society answered 401 calls for assistance and visited 101 households. Through your generosity, over \$12,000 in

financial aid was given to 267 families. Members of the Gabriel Project gave material assistance to 76 women ranging from full layettes to diapers and clothing. Members of the Ladies Club donated socks stuffed with soap, shampoo, toothbrush and toothpaste for the homeless.

Through their fundraising efforts, the Ladies Club presented a \$5,000.00 check to me to help with parish expenses in addition to collecting money for flowers for Easter, Christmas, and our Novena. Members of the Men's Club worked hard this past year keeping our grounds and facilities in order and continued to host the weekly Lenten fish fries.

The Parish Life Commission continued to sponsor the parish picnic, Halloween Party, Christmas Party, Soup Supper, and Advent Family Night. The Funeral Luncheon Committee hosted "Mercy Meals" for several families. Members of the Christopher Ministry continued their work with homebound parishioners. Family members of those buried from Little Flower were invited to our annual Mass of Remembrance and received a candle with their loved one's name on it.

The Parish Pastoral Council celebrated parish involvement in the National Eucharistic Congress, supporting several members of the parish in attending the NEC and collected insights and knowledge throughout the year of preparation. The Parish Council is at the forefront of preparing for our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1925 and 1926.

The *Invite* Commission continued to offer ongoing courses and Bible studies. With help from school students, they distributed information, rosaries, and medals at Summerfest. They hosted National Night Out in August. They distributed free school supplies and information about Catholicism at the school cookout.

The School Commission created strategic goals leading to the creation of three subcommittees: Mission and Faith, Teacher Retention, and Social Justice, Belonging and Dignity. They captured and documented Little Flower Catholic School traditions for preservation. The school also began a shift toward a more play-based kindergarten where children still earn essential skills but in an environment more conducive to 5-year-old learning styles. Four staff members attended Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta to learn about and begin to implement a new House System for our students.

At the same time, we are facing new challenges. The biggest challenge will be transitioning to a new pastor after 22 years with me as your pastor. However, please remember that the new pastor will be transitioning too, so please extend grace to him.

Many of our other challenges have been the same or similar for many years. The first is to continue to work to improve weekend Mass attendance numbers to pre-pandemic levels or greater. The second is to increase, or at least maintain, Sunday giving to meet our Sunday collection budget. This year these will be even bigger challenges than usual. As I mentioned when I announced my retirement, a couple of older priests told me that there is usually a decline in Sunday Mass attendance and/or a decline in Sunday collection income when there is a change of pastor. Please do not let that happen.

We need to find new volunteers, especially younger volunteers, to help with the various ministries, while continuing to find new ways to minister to parishioners. We also need to find

ways to get more families to participate in parish celebrations. We need to increase the number of parishioners involved in liturgical ministries, including finding enough youth to resume our parish youth choir, which is sorely missed.

We will need to work with our next pastor to establish a search committee to find our next Director of Pastoral Music and then to welcome and integrate our new Parish Music Director while maintaining/improving our music ministry.

Finally, Little Flower School's largest challenges are finding, hiring, and retaining qualified teachers with fewer teachers in the market and our salaries well below public school salaries at the same time as there is increased need for more English Language resources and more students with increased academic, social, and emotional needs.

My brothers and sisters, as Thanksgiving Day approaches, Little Flower parish and school has much for which to be grateful. However, we also have many challenges as we get ready to celebrate our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Please pray for God's continued blessings upon our parish and school.