

Gathered Into One by the Holy Spirit



Pastoral Letter

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 3, 2023

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

The great St. Augustine wrote, “Jesus promised us a share in his divinity, but he would be deceiving us if he had not first become a sharer in our mortality. The Son of God shared our humanity so that we might become sharers in his divinity.”

And that, my friends, is the good news of salvation; that we might become sharers in Christ’s divinity. Our faith rests on the promise of Jesus, that if we share in his cross, we will share in his resurrection. This is the “Wow!” of our Catholic faith.

We’re being invited to keep the Big Picture in mind as we go about our lives as members of Two Holy Martyrs Parish. The primary reason a parish exists is to help nurture our communal and individual relationship with the Lord so that we become disciples who live the good news of salvation and share the good news of salvation with the world.

This pastoral letter seeks to guide us as we journey together these next few years. A parish needs to be many things to many people, but the core mission of the parish is to celebrate the Eucharist, preach and teach the Gospel, administer the sacraments, form human minds and hearts in truth and love, and live the corporeal and spiritual works of mercy. Everything else flows from the core mission.

Please set aside some time to read this letter in its entirety. We’re invited to not only read it, but to pray with it. Allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate your mind and enlarge your heart. Pay attention to what stirs in your heart. Be open to how the Lord desires to work with you and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our faith is never purely individualistic, it is also communal. We journey together as we make our pilgrim way Home.

Centrality of Christ & Primacy of the Eucharist

The most spiritually important event each week in the parish is the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. We leave our homes and gather communally in our spiritual home. This is where we hear the story of salvation. We reflect on its meaning in our lives. We offer our petitions to God. Our gifts of bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. We receive Holy Communion, offer our gratitude and are sent back into the world glorifying God by our lives.

Everything else we do in parish life flows from and returns to this celebration of the Eucharist. There is no greater contact with God in this world than in the intimate sharing of the Eucharist. The Lord gives. We receive. The Eucharist is spiritual food for our hungry souls.

When we receive communion, we do not consume bread and wine. During the Eucharistic Prayer, ordinary earthly bread and wine – the gift of the people – become the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus – the gift from God. This has always been the Church’s understanding of the Eucharist.

At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and said, “This is My Body.” He took the cup, “This the chalice of My Blood.” The Lord continues by saying, “Do this in memory of me.” Do what? Celebrate this new Passover meal, which we now call the Eucharist. We’ve been doing this in memory of him for 2,000 years and we will continue until Christ comes again in glory.

St. John Bosco offer us caution. He wrote, “The longer you stay away from Communion, the more your soul will be weak, and in the end, you will become dangerously indifferent.” We cannot afford to become dangerously indifferent to this Gift of Finest Wheat.

It’s no coincidence we refer to our reception of the Eucharist as Holy Communion. It is our reverent reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus that brings us closer to God and closer to our brothers and sisters. It is the Sacrament of Love that brings us into communion.

The Eucharist is the Church’s center, her most precious treasure. The Church is built up around the Eucharist, and so as the people of God in Two Holy Martyrs Parish, we make the Eucharist the center of all parish life so that, in response to Jesus giving his life for us, we give our life for Him, trusting that He is with us always until the end of time.

Sunday, Sunday, Sunday

Sunday is the Lord’s Day. Sunday is the new Sabbath. Sunday is the day of resurrection.

Judeo-Christian tradition has always set aside the one day a week when we cease from work and make time for God, for family/friends and for rest. Sadly, in our culture, we’ve allowed Sunday to become just another day of the week, much to the Evil One’s delight.

Sacred Scripture reminds us, “The sabbath was made for man not man for the sabbath.” God does not need the sabbath. We do. We need to be reminded that God is God and we are not. We need to spend time nurturing relationship – with God and our loved ones. We need to rest our bodies. Our culture shouts “Go, go, go. Do, do, do.” Our Creator summons us to time with Him, time with family, time with rest.

Take a moment and honestly look at how you spend your Sunday. Are we using it as the Lord suggests?

The good Lord never meant for any of this to be a burden to us. God desires it to be a blessing. People will sometimes say, “We have to go to Mass.” There is a yes and no to that approach. Yes, because Sunday Mass is an obligation of the faith, but it is also a no because the gift of freewill means we can make the choice to excuse ourselves from the communal celebration of the Eucharist. We always have the choice to do whatever we so desire on Sunday.

A maturing disciple begins to see Sunday in a new way. We get to go to Holy Mass. We get to pray in community. We get to sing. We get to offer our petitions to the Lord. We receive Holy Communion. We are blessed and sent. We begin to view our worship as a return of love toward the One who first loved us. The word Eucharist is a Greek word that means thanksgiving. This makes sense because when we gather for Holy Mass, we are giving thanks to God for what Christ has done for us by way of His Paschal Mystery, which is His suffering, death, resurrection and ascension.

Remember friends, death is not the victor. Love is stronger than death, and Love is Who died on the cross so that you and I might have life; this means eternal life. The Love we receive in Holy Communion is the same Love who sacrificed His Body and Blood on Calvary. “This is my Body given up for you.” This is a Love summoning us to be in Union with Him now and for all eternity.

Honor the Past, Live in the Present, Prepare for Tomorrow

Parish life has changed recently on the southwest side of Chicago. On July 1, 2020, two formerly separate parishes united into one parish. The new reality followed a year-long discernment by parishioners and the leaders from the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Many things were looked at during the discernment phase of Renew My Church. After a year of meetings, prayer and discernment, a recommendation was sent to the Archbishop of Chicago. It was recommended that St. Symphorosa Parish and St. Rene Goupil Parish unite into a new parish, which we now call Two Holy Martyrs (both St. Symphorosa and St. Rene Goupil were martyred for the faith. They were killed because of their belief in Christ). Cardinal Cupich accepted the recommendation of the discernment team.

We've now been Two Holy Martyrs Parish for three-and-half years. We have decided to continue with two campuses/two churches. Although we have two campuses and two church buildings, it's important that we all understand we function as one parish with one pastor assigned to the parish by the Archbishop of Chicago. The pastor is assisted by parish staff and parishioner leadership.

All our ministries operate under the heading of Two Holy Martyrs Parish. Examples are: Knights of Columbus, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Scouts, Altar & Rosary Society, Transformation, Senior Club, etc. These groups represent one parish, and all groups should operate accordingly.

Has this been a challenge at times? Of course. We are human beings. Change is received differently by different people for different reasons. At the same time, so many people have helped move us in a healthy direction; the direction of unity in Christ.

This is why it is so important that we continually remind ourselves why a parish exists. What's its primary purpose? The parish is a visible, concrete place in a community where the Gospel is proclaimed, the Eucharist is celebrated, the faith is taught, and the corporeal and spiritual works of mercy are lived out. A parish exists because a diocese exists, and a diocese exists because the universal Church exists, and the universal Church exists because Christ exists. It's all connected. No Christ, no Church. No Church, no diocese. No diocese, no parish.

Moving forward is never forgetting the past. We keep memories alive, especially those men and women who helped St. Symphorosa Parish (dating back to 1927) and St. Rene Goupil Parish (dating back to 1960) serve the people of the southwest side of Chicago. We have two wonderful histories to draw from as we live history today in the year 2023 and beyond.

Think of all the baptisms in our churches; all the First Communions, Confirmations, weddings, funerals, Sunday Masses, and Holy Days of Obligation. Think of all the socials and good times. Think of all the obstacles and challenges overcome. This is the history we must honor, and the history we draw upon today as we continue this new chapter as Two Holy Martyrs Parish.

Spiritual Concerns, Fiscal Concerns

What's the most important thing happening in a parish? Souls are being saved. People are encountering the Risen Christ. Folks no longer live solely for themselves but for Christ and others. Holiness and sanctification matter. This is what God's grace is all about. Our humanity is being lifted toward divinity.

Please keep this in mind as we briefly walk through the current parish structure of having two campuses/two church buildings. There is no doubt a purely economic decision could have been made during the discernment phase of Renew My Church. A purely fiscal decision would have been to close entirely one of the two campuses. The discernment team did not think that would have been the best decision at the time for pastoral reasons. We believed the two-campus option was feasible. We could use both church buildings and use the St. Rene school building as a rental to generate much-needed dollars. This is what we are currently doing. We currently utilize both campuses and both church buildings on a weekly basis.

As we continue to mature as Two Holy Martyrs Parish, we will regularly look at how we are using our facilities. What do we need? What do we not need? What makes sense spiritually? What makes sense fiscally? We do all this mindful of today's reality but with tomorrow's possibilities. This is the "live in the present, prepare for tomorrow" part of our mission.

People tend to get turned off when we address financial concerns, but as you know from your own life, dollars and cents are a reality. It's no different for a parish. Money comes in, and money goes out; just like any other business. However, the Church is not just a business. She is also the Sacrament of Salvation. She is a mission. Yes, the Church has organizational structures, but in her origin, she is divine. While the spiritual side is aided by the work of the Holy Spirit, her institutional side uses the norms of earthly economics. The lights in the church stay on because we pay our electric provider, but bread and wine at Holy Mass become the Body and Blood of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. We need both realities in parish life.

Please understand the fiscal aspect of parish life. Parish staff and parish leadership do our best to be good stewards of our resources. Spiritual life is primary, but the fiscal side of parish life is at the service of the spiritual. When that gets switched, then we've lost our priority. Sacred Scripture frequently reminds us how often the love of money becomes more important than love of God and neighbor.

Thank you to so many of our parishioners who give generously each week and each month. In all seriousness, you keep the mission possible on the southwest side. This letter is also an invitation to revisit your current contribution to the parish. Are you able to increase your contribution in the coming year? If you give nothing, please give something. And if you need to meet with me as the pastor to discuss a matter of grievance that prevents you from giving, please reach out to me so I can hear your concern. At the very least, I'll hear your concern.

Between federal taxes, state taxes, county taxes, city taxes, school tuitions, sales tax, groceries, real estate taxes, etc., we all feel our purses stretched. Not everyone makes a regular contribution to the parish a priority. That's why our tone must always be one of a respectful and reverent request as part of parish stewardship.

Educating and Forming our Children

The ancient philosopher Aristotle wrote, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."

Two Holy Martyrs Parish serves the task of childhood education in two ways: through our parish school (St. Symphorosa School) and through our Faith Formation program. In these two settings, children are formed as children of God.

Yes, the intellectual life matters, but as disciples of Christ we understand that the heart is the core of the human being. You can have a child who has a 4.0 GPA but who is becoming a less-than-loving person. Christian education engages the mind and the heart. Our faith helps us mature so that we become who God desires us to be as human beings in union with Christ.

The school and Faith Formation program are ministries of the parish. We are in a relationship with one another as a parish. The parish school has the additional task of teaching our children educational basics. A quality Catholic elementary education is offered here, and this ministry needs to be supported by school parents and parishioners. School parents also need to support the life of our parish. This mission transcends our time on earth. What are we leaving to the next generations? We must hand on the faith to our children and our children's children.

Faith Formation helps those children who are attending a public school to receive formation in the Catholic faith. Parents might not be able to send their children to our school, but they desire for their children to learn more about life than math, science, and language. In Faith Formation, they discover who they are in God's eyes, and learn the beauty of our faith.

Ponder this quote by Neil Postman. He wrote, "Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see."

Who or what will form our children? In our parish, they learn who the Who is – Jesus!

The Necessity of Christ in our World

The word religion is being abused these days. People say, "if there were no religions, we'd have peace." Part of the word origin of the English word religion is the Latin word religare, which means to bind or to connect. We get a hint of the word ligament. A ligament connects bones. The purpose of authentic religion is to bind or connect divinity and humanity; heaven and earth; God and us.

Jesus, the Son of God and Son of man, is the mediator for us. He accomplished our salvation by the Paschal Mystery. If we're being honest, we know that sin, evil and death are a reality in this world. We need Someone out of this world to come into this world, and to restore what had been fractured; the harmony between God and man. Jesus, by His cross and resurrection, restores the relationship. Sin, evil and death are eternally conquered. Yes, the battles wage on in human hearts, but we already know the end of the story. This is not our doing. We need a Savior, and God the Father sent the Son to die our death so that we might now live in Him. Only human arrogance says, "I don't need Jesus."

Humility admits we're not in control. We cannot -- on our own human power -- conquer sin, evil and death. God can, and thanks be to Christ, God did in the Blood shed on the cross. In the resurrection of Easter, God shows us that death is not the victor. Love is stronger than death. Jesus promises us that if we share in His cross, we will also share in His resurrection. This is the hope that sustains us as Christians, as followers of the One Who is the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. Jesus is Emmanuel; God with us.

Allow me, in this pastoral letter, to recommend a book that helps us better understand the necessity of Christ. This book will change how you see the faith and why Christ is so important to humanity. The title of the book is *“Rescued: The Unexpected and Extraordinary News of the Gospel.”* The author is Fr. John Riccardo. The book is readable, understandable, and relatable. When we truly understand why our faith is good news, it then changes how we want to live our lives in this world, and how our parish plays a role in the sanctification of the world.

Communion & Dis-union

The title of this pastoral letter is an invitation to see Jesus as the great unifier of humanity. In His prayer to the Father, Jesus prayed that we might be one as He and the Father are one. This is the goal of our faith and the purpose of our life – union with God.

The title of this letter comes from Eucharistic Prayer II used during Holy Mass. We join Jesus in praying for unity. Here’s the entire paragraph: “Humbly we pray that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit.”

Our celebration of the Eucharist and our reception of Holy Communion is meant to bring us closer together; with God and with each other. This has both macro and micro application: macro in that Jesus can unite all of humankind; micro in that Jesus can bring us closer together within this parish. There is no possible way to see a brother or sister in Christ as a “them.”

Authentic unity comes via our humble surrender to Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

We would be spiritually naïve to dismiss the reality of the Adversary who seeks, wherever it can, to work against God and humankind. We call this thing the Devil, or as St. Ignatius did, the Enemy. Because so many people have dismissed this reality, we are not able to see clearly what is going on in our world. What is going on? The loss of the sense of God, profanation of the sacred, dehumanization, secularization of morality, intense anger, escalating violence, rising immorality, use of horrific weapons of war. This list could go on. Our technology risks exceeding our humanity.

We often talk about the great spiritual battle between good and evil. Well, that battle goes on inside every human heart. We could easily rephrase the battle as one between the Unifier and the Divider. Legendary singer and songwriter Bob Dylan put it this way when he wrote, “But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed, you’re gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

The word diabolic comes from diabolos. This means to tear apart; to separate; to divide. This is always the work of the Enemy. He hates God and hates humanity. And by any means necessary, seeks to pull us out of relationship with God and out of relationship with one another. We risk slowly becoming an inconvenience to one another, and an inconvenience that needs to be eliminated. And yes, this Agitator even slithers around parish life at times seeking to deceive, discourage, divide and divert.

Ponder the words of Jesus, the Christ. He says, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

We don't ignore the problems of this world when we surrender into the arms of Jesus. Just the opposite. Living in the arms of the merciful Lord opens our eyes and enlarges our hearts so that we become more lovingly attentive to a neighbor in need, and we become more caring stewards of creation. Jesus is the Why that drives the Church's teaching on social justice. Our faith is God's love in action in and through us. Depending on whom we choose to serve, we become either channels of God's peace ... or pawns of demonic war.

Okay, So Now What?

Honor the past. Live in the Present. Prepare for the future. That's what we're doing as we say goodbye to 2023 and welcome 2024 and beyond. We can't run the risk of anchoring ourselves in the past. The divine ship that is the Church moves on and she carries the eternal truth of the Gospel through the stormy waters of the present day all the while hoping and praying for the day of fulfillment when Christ comes again in glory.

In parish life, we keep hope alive by praying, celebrating the Eucharist weekly (if not daily), administering the sacraments, reading sacred scripture, learning the faith, and living out the corporeal and spiritual works of mercy. And yes, along the way, we can have fun. We can be people of joy because of the truth of the Risen Lord. All our social events and fundraising events serve one another, our community, and our parish because we have our collective eyes on Christ. We truly are gathered into one by the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God!

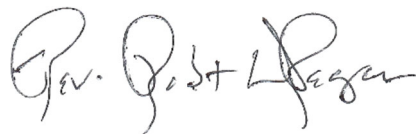
The parish leadership that emerges in the next few years is vital to the future of the parish. Some of you will be called upon to Rise Up! You will become servant leaders who help our brothers and sisters deepen their faith and grow closer to the Lord. Begin to spend time in prayer and see how the Lord might be summoning you to servant leadership at Two Holy Martyrs.

This servant leadership does not mean busy activity, but focused intentionality of making disciples, building the community, and inspiring witness. We can sum up our mission succinctly by saying "We bring people to God, and we bring God to people."

We have good news to share; very good news.

St. Symphorosa, pray for us. St. Rene Goupil, pray for us.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Bob Regan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fr. Bob Regan
Pastor
Two Holy Martyrs Parish
Chicago, Illinois