

Reflections

Homily for February 24, 2002
Second Sunday of Lent A Cycle

By Father Charles Bowes

Matthew 17:1-9;
Genesis 12:1-4;
2 Timothy 1:8-10

*The future is a safe place to journey
because the Lord is with us always.*

St. Matthew's purpose in writing this narrative of the Transfiguration was not to state simple history but to assure his hearers, all of whom were new to the faith and being persecuted for that faith, not to be afraid. St. Matthew wanted to assure his people that God was indeed with them in Jesus, but that there was no escape from the struggle of the cross or from the changes and challenges a life of faith or any life offers. That's what's behind the three booths St. Peter wanted to build – "Hey, Jesus, let me set up three places so you and we can enjoy this forever." They wanted to build temples in the hope that they could capture and make permanent this moment of ecstasy. It sounds so familiar to our own human reactions today – we want to grab a spiritual stance and hold onto it – a way of peace, free from the world's chaos and change. We want instant hope, instant spiritual growth, instant peace, like instant credit or fast internet communication.

We also would like to build our three booths. We have a wonderful parish community at OLR. I've been bumping around parishes as a priest for over thirty years, and I've never before encountered in one place such a concentration of faith and talent so eagerly and willingly put at the disposal of the Church. You only have to look at the parish Guide Book to see the breadth of service – seventeen pages listing people, ministries, and organizations working to make sure we all experience the presence of Christ in our lives and in each other.

But, folks, there is no safe escape or fast track to full life or salvation. That's not what our Gospel promises – Peter, James and John had to come down the mountain and face Good Friday. And the hearers of St. Matthew's Gospel, then and now, have to face the changes life brings.

And life is bringing some big changes for us as a Catholic Church and as a Catholic parish.

As regards our parish, the population in the area served by our parish is doing two things: declining in numbers and declining in the number of Catholics moving in. This has been going on for well over a decade. This has impacted us with fewer registered parishioners and fewer children in our school. Furthermore, beyond our parish, the Archdiocese and dioceses around the country are facing a decline in the number of priests. In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati there are around 230 parishes served by almost as many priests. In less than twenty years we are looking at no more than 60 to 100 priests to serve over 200 parishes. In our own backyard, St. Matthias and St. Gabriel parishes are slated to share a pastor. The Franciscans are withdrawing from Corpus Christi this summer, and for the first time a diocesan priest will be assigned there as pastor with the understanding that he will work with our parish, and with the parishes of St. Bartholomew and St. John Neumann, to plan for a future in which we shall work together in some way.

These are not things to be afraid of. The Lord is with us. Change is good. From it comes growth and progress. The challenge is to not let change manage us, but to manage change so that we can continue to be a strong Christian Family: welcoming, sharing, and growing.

Our parish commissions and special committees have been addressing the future. The Parish Council has recommended that now we inform the parish more fully where we are and where we are headed in terms of two things: parish finances and our parish future. So I have help – a lot of it and very capable – two from among many who will address our

finances and our plans for the future: Mr. Brian Young of our Strategic Planning Search Committee and Mr. Doug Harris of our Financial Planning Protocol Committee.

With that background in mind, I welcome Mr. Brian Young.

Mr. Young:

Father spoke of change. His words challenge us to “think outside the box” and not grab at the quick, easy and simple answers to the challenges of today. He spoke of changes in our Church and our parish. I have been a member of OLR for all my life. I remember a time when we had three priests, five Masses on the weekends, a church filled with people and a school with two classes at every level and over 500 students. Now, we have one priest, three weekend Masses, a church rarely full and a school with under 200 students fighting to survive. If that’s not change, I do not know what is!

I stand before you today wearing two hats. I am Chair of the Finance Commission. This is the body of volunteers charged with monitoring the financial conduct of the parish. My second hat is as Head of the Strategic Planning Search Committee. I have two messages. One bad, dealing with the reality of today. One good, offering hope for the future.

First the bad. Our financial situation is grim. Budget cuts, expense deferrals, and an increase in giving have helped. Much has been done. Much more will need to be done.

Now the good news. In October, Father asked me to form a committee to look at the future and develop a plan to address the needs of the parish. The group became known as the Strategic Planning Search Committee. The committee consists of a representative from every Commission in the parish and three members at large. We have determined both short and long-term needs. Short term – we need to find new sources of income and revenue. Long term – we need to set a path for the next ten years. To fully satisfy these needs it was determined that professional help would be required. Consequently, after polling ten firms, we are interviewing three companies. Each of these companies specializes in needs assessment, marketing, strategic planning, and financial management for mid-size Catholic parishes, like OLR. We will report our recommendations to the Parish Council and the Pastor in March. By summer, a firm will be hired. The planning process may take as long as a year. During that time, you will be asked to share your views and opinions. You will be asked to help shape the future. You

will be asked to become a part of what we are – a parish. We will all be involved in this exciting and dynamic endeavor to take charge of our destiny. I am confident, at the completion of this development process, that we will be better prepared to meet the future head-on with resolve and on sound financial ground. We will be managing change, not being controlled by it.

In another area, Mr. Doug Harris and a committee of volunteers have been developing a plan to streamline parish operations. He will now address this issue with you.

Mr. Harris:

“The future is a safe place to journey because the Lord is with us always.” Father’s thought is comforting. It tells us that God is with us not only when we are praying or participating in the sacraments, but also that God is with us in the ordinary things of life as well. He is with us when we work, when we pay the bills, when we pack the lunches for the kids, when we mow the lawn or fix a leaky sink. God is with us in all things.

Well, as Brian mentioned, our parish is facing some tough financial times. We are fighting a budget deficit. The demographics are stacked against us, making it a challenge to support the wonderful things we have as a parish. In response to these issues, Father asked Brian to address our future. Father also asked me to be part of a task force of business professionals to examine the “business” of the parish organization. The challenge was to maximize our limited resources to make sure that we were getting “maximum bang for our buck.”

Our “mission statement” included the following three things:

To ensure that:

- 1) the business organization of OLR is as efficient and effective as it can be
- 2) there are effective financial control policies and procedures in place
- 3) we have the ability to monitor the effectiveness of the organization through the best possible use of financial reporting at **all** levels

That means providing timely and relevant financial information to the people that guide this parish. To the parish staff who work diligently to meet our needs as a community

of the faithful. To parish commissions that support and advise the parish staff in carrying out the ministry of OLR. And, to each of you who provide the time, talent and financial resources that keep this parish going.

Our task force has been meeting for a couple of months. We have been working to better define the parish organization, to delineate lines of communication, to firm up approval processes, to improve the financial control procedures, and to develop an effective budget process. We expect to end our work by mid-March, and at that time we will be presenting a list of recommendations for review and implementation.

You may be saying to yourself, “this is a church, not a business.” And, you’re right! However, the tools and methods utilized by the business world to maximize financial profit can be equally utilized to maximize scarce resources in furthering the mission of this parish.

Providing a solid financial infrastructure that maximizes our limited resources will allow the wonderful people of this parish to continue to provide the programs that you and I need in our lives – handing on the faith to adults; educating our children in a wholesome, Catholic environment; caring for the disadvantaged; sharing the Good News with our neighbors; and helping us all to mature spiritually. These are the things of our faith life, our community, our parish. But for them to continue, we need to effectively manage the things of the material life.

The future is uncertain. That is for certain. But what is also certain is that we are putting a lot of effort into doing everything that we can to prepare for the future and, most comforting of all, the Lord is with us always.

Thank you, Gentlemen.

Now, I wish I could tell you exactly what the future will look like as we undertake this planning process, “strategic planning” it’s called. But I can’t do that. I can’t tell you exactly how all the neighboring parishes will work together and which ones will work with whom. But work together we must, and plan together we must. To survive, certainly, but more importantly, to share our faith, focused on the celebration of the Eucharist. After all, the Mass is the most important thing

we do as Catholics. It makes us who we are – a people who gather to praise God for what God does in Jesus, and to become through bread and wine and one another that very Body of Christ to the world we touch.

Sometime in the next few months, I’ll be able to introduce to you a company our Parish Council, Staff and various Commissions have recommended and I have accepted. We will then work with this company, hand in hand, to increase our income and help us plan for the future. Until then, I ask for what is already so much in evidence, your prayers and your continued support financially. And on your behalf and mine I extend to all the talented and dedicated parishioners who serve on our various committees, commissions, ministries, and outreach programs our heartfelt gratitude. Folks, one thing this parish is blessed with in abundance is people of extraordinary talent and generous hearts – who share both in overflowing measure. May God continue to bless the efforts of us and of all who seek to do His will and share the faith so graciously given in Jesus Christ. This weekend we pray for the continuing conversion of those baptized Christians who are being received into full communion with the Catholic Church at Easter. I know you’ll be generous in prayer for them as well.

So, let us pray for our present and for our future: Good and gracious God, you reveal yourself in surprising ways and never cease to call and to challenge. Bless our search for you in the spiritual and the temporal. Reveal yourself anew in the efforts we make now and in the future. We make our prayer through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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