

Homily delivered by the Pastor, Rev. Andrew M Prachar on the weekend of December 2, 2012

When I'm working to prepare a homily for Sunday, I read and reflect on the Scriptures for the Mass. I also reflect on what I've experienced during the week in your lives. As the Gospel says today: *"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves."* I reflect on what the Lord says and I reflect on what your joys and struggles are. As a priest and especially as pastor, as I pray and reflect and look at the needs of the parish and, to paraphrase today's gospel, the signs of the times, I find that God leads me and directs me when I pay attention to Him especially in prayer and in the sacraments.

I'd like to share a journey of faith and leadership that I have been on since last spring. It's been a journey of reading the signs of the times. It's a journey that began, I believe, when I began praying as to whether I should ask the Archbishop to be the pastor here at Little Flower. The journey continues every day that I pray when I ask the Lord to guide me in being pastor of our parish. Today's Psalm 25 says: *"Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior, and for you I wait all the day."*

We, as a faith community, have been praying almost every weekend the prayer for our parish which is based on our parish Mission statement. Part of my journey of faith and leadership has been in my wondering how God was working with the prayer that we have been praying. In the past six months, I have come to know that God truly has been working through our prayer for our parish.

My main role as pastor is to ensure that our Catholic faith handed down to us by our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, is alive and growing in our parish. Second to this, the way our Roman Catholic Church has structured the role of pastor, I am also the Chief Operations Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Executive Officer, and Human Resource director of the parish.

As a part of this faith and leadership journey I need to feed you some history and information as well as express a concern about our parish. Fifty years ago the parish bought the property that makes up the Upper church, rectory and former school. When the parish bought the property, we agreed to a deed restriction which states that if the property were ever to cease being used for education purposes, the property reverts back to the township. This deed restriction cannot be lifted since it is a contractual agreement between the parish and the township. The deed restriction has limited us in that we haven't wanted, even if we were able, to make a huge investment on property that legally could be taken from us.

A few years ago, the Finance Council and I had an engineering and architectural study conducted to learn what condition this building, the upper church and the former school, is in structurally. We learned at that time that within 5-7 years from that 2009 project the price tag would be an estimated \$5 million in repair and modification costs to the Upper Church/Pastoral center building to replace the roofs and bring the building up to current building code requirements and standards. This is before we can even consider a complete renovation of the Upper Church worship space.

In fact, over the past year, some of the staff and I have been increasingly using our time, talent, energy and the parish's money dealing with property management and facilities' condition issues. As an example, most recently, you will remember that over the summer we spent over \$110,000 for the

remediation of the asbestos ceiling tiles in the pastoral center. The replacing of the roof of the upper church and pastoral center was postponed due to such a large unforeseen expenditure. This was why we celebrated Masses in the Little Church for a number of summer Sundays.

We have very generous people here in the parish. You have increased your weekly offertory. We have parishioners who help take down trees, do painting, donate flowers and do other work around the parish. One family does our snow plowing every year which in the worst of winters has saved us tens of thousands of dollars.

I began to realize last June that I was moving more and more away from the “spiritual” work entrusted to me as the pastor. More of my focus, time, talent and energy were being consumed with physical plant repair issues. I was in great conflict: I was finding less and less time for my main role of leading the parish in your spiritual needs. In a conversation with the Finance Council I shared with them that I did not any longer want to neglect my responsibilities as a priest and pastor. I was wearing the property manager hat more than I was wearing the hat of the priest and pastor.

As any CEO, my job is to continually think strategically and plan for our parish future. With the aspiration and goals of fostering a self-sustaining, vibrant, growing church community, we face certain challenges today that need to be addressed. Foremost of these challenges are the immediate upkeep and repair of ageing physical buildings, developing a more spiritual place of worship, and providing for the economic well-being of our parish for the long-term. Over the past few months I have sought advice, heard recommendations, and discussed various proposals on how best to remedy these challenges, while still living within our parish’s fiscal budget. I am here to tell you about a very interesting proposal currently being discussed informally with the Archdiocese and the township. On an informal level, the Finance Council and I have discussed a bilateral remedy to logistical issues facing both Little Flower and Berkeley Heights.

The Finance Council and I began to talk about what I present to you today as a vision for “right-sizing” the parish. In informal meetings with the Archdiocese and the township of Berkeley Heights, I have introduced this vision. I want to be clear: this is my dream and it has the support of the parish Finance Council. However, neither the Archdiocese nor the town has approved it although both seem to have favorably received the “right-sizing” concept and the approach we would like them to consider, at least in those limited off-hand discussions about the subject.

The vision for the near future, based on the “signs of the times” is that the parish of the Little Flower needs to be “right-sized”. I’ve named this dream: “Going Home!” My dream is that the property that is presently under the “reverter” deed restriction, i.e. the Upper church, the rectory and the surrounding property would be exchanged for the library. We would completely move all of our activities over to the Little Church property to be joined with the adjacent library property. First and foremost, we would expand our beloved Little Church to accommodate our typical Sunday Mass population. We would have one church that would not be a former gymnasium/auditorium: a true sacred space that is better than what we have here even after the reorientation. The new altar and ambo and other refurbished items would move to the only Church of the Little Flower. We would have our administrative offices and meeting places, including religious education, centralized at the

present library. The envisioned space plan also allows enough room to include ministries and programs we presently can't or don't do: a gathering space for all parishioners where we can have after Mass coffees where people who are old and young and disabled can gather; we would also have a larger meeting space for social events; we would have an after school ministry to the middle schoolers at Columbia school, to name a few new potential opportunities. **And, there will be no reverter clause: it will be our property, free and clear!**

My fear and concern is that if we don't live out this vision, this "Going home" dream that I have, there is a danger that faced with a \$5 million capital requirement, the parish will die a slow financial death. The bottom line is that we can't nor do we expect to be able to afford to repair, modify, improve and maintain the 26 acres and all the buildings that presently make up our parish and still have a vibrant, faith-filled Catholic community of faith. We need to establish a better balance. Servicing the 26 acres and the spiritual needs of the parish need to be done in harmony. Rightsizing our space will allow that.

Again, I have informally shared this vision with both the Archdiocese and the town. As information becomes available I commit to giving you regular updates in the future.

"Going home." This is a dream. This is a vision of a Church of the Little Flower that lives on for a very long time. "Going home." This is a dream and a vision of a parish that can live out the Gospel even more than we are doing now. "Going home." It is a dream and a vision that I hope can be realized. It's a dream rooted in our prayer for our parish that, I believe, God has heard and is answering. It is a vision that is based on looking at the signs of the times for us as a parish. It is a dream rooted in my vocation and yours as disciples of our Lord. I am inviting you today to think about the dream, the vision for our parish that I have: a dream of right-sizing the parish, of "going home."

I've given you a lot to digest today. I am sure you will have lots of questions. Please take the week to reflect and pray on what I have shared in this homily. My homily will be on our parish website on Monday morning. Next weekend, after all the Masses, I will meet with whomever would like to ask questions or offer comments to meet with me after each Mass when I will attempt to answer your questions.

As I conclude this homily, I invite you to pick up your missalettes and join me in the prayer for our parish.
