

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
Sept. 6 & 7, 2014

Rev. Fred Daley
All Saints Church, Syr., NY

"Fire burning in my heart"
Sermon on the State of the Parish

Last weekend in his excellent homily, our Charles Clinton shared with us how he got involved with our sister-community in Villanueva, Nicaragua: how, at first, he was rather reluctant – feeling like he had enough going on in his life already. But – like Jeremiah – he felt God’s call “...like a fire burning in my heart...,” that he couldn’t ignore. That fire that continues to burn within Charles and his affirmative response is a true blessing for this vital ministry that he reflected on last weekend.

I was away last weekend, but when I read the copy of his Homily and watched the video, I couldn’t help but think about a similar experience I had six years ago: I had finished my 14 years of ministry at St. Francis de Sales Parish in Utica and had been helping out in a couple of other parishes around the Diocese, waiting for parish in the Utica area to open up. Since I had spent the majority of my years of ministry in Utica, it made absolute sense – to me – that I stay there.

But one morning I was opening my mail and saw a letter from the Chancery asking priests to consider applying for the pastorate of a new parish that would be formed from the merging of the Our Lady of Solace and St. Therese Parishes. I was ready to throw it in the circular file (in other words: the wastebasket!), when my eye caught the ‘Parish Profile’ – a summary of the envisioned parish. As I read the profile I felt a fire burning in my heart and I couldn’t throw the profile away. I kept reading the profile over and over..., and the rest is history! I couldn’t ignore God’s call to apply and today I’m so grateful. I guess we can blame the folks who wrote up that profile!

My sisters and brothers, it doesn’t seem possible that our new All Saints Parish will be concluding our sixth year on the Feast All Saints, November 1! Also, I will be finishing up my first six-year term as Pastor. Upon an evaluation process, I have the opportunity to serve a second six-year term. The Diocese, according to its protocol, has asked Fr. Tim Taugher – who some of you know from his time at Our Lady of Solace – to facilitate an Evaluation Team made-up of staff, several priests and a number of parish representatives. I have also asked the Pastoral Council for their input and would really appreciate input any of you might have. A questionnaire is available in the Greeting Area, with details of where to send it when complete. Your input would be a great help to me.

In light of this moment, the Pastoral Council and I myself thought it would be a good idea that in place of the homily this weekend, I give a little “State of the Parish” reflection: where have we been? where is the Spirit leading us?

I'll never forget the painful but very touching last weekend of October 2008 when the Parishes of Our Lady of Solace and St. Therese gathered to ritually close the two Parishes... there was deep sadness, certainly some anger and a lot of gratitude for the rich history and memories that began 82 years earlier for both Parish communities. In the midst of it all, I remember inviting folks to prayerfully consider giving the new All Saints Parish – that would be officially opening the next weekend – a chance; and then prayed (and held my breath!) for a week, while renovations were made in this facility so that our All Saints Church would be a new home for all. Our first weekend was very festive and hopeful, with a tremendous turnout of folks. The celebration culminated with a special Mass on the following Monday with Bishop Costello presiding, during which the statue of St. Martin de Porres – a special Patron of the people of Our Lady of Solace – was placed in its new home. From these early days, from the ashes of pain and sadness, many of us could sense and feel that something new was being birthed: there was “a fire burning” in our hearts! The Spirit was calling us to begin again. I will always be grateful for the parish leadership of Our Lady of Solace and St. Therese and for all those who were willing to cross over to the other side. Special thanks to our Sr. Frances Teresa and Fr. Andy – who, serving Our Lady of Solace and St. Therese for over 40 years – were really solid rocks that said to us that everything will be okay: “All will be well”!

The fruits of these first six years give us great hope as we plan for our future. Let me share some of these hopeful signs.

1. Since the beginning weekend, little by little more sisters and brothers continue to find All Saints to be a spiritual home. Following the unfortunate closing of St. Andrews Parish in January 2009, a number of those Parishioners joined us, while others joined St. Lucy's Parish – which has created a wonderful relationship between our two parishes. The statue of St. Andrew (bit thinner than St. Therese and St. Martin!) arrived a bit later to share space here in our Sanctuary. With the unfortunate situation of St. Mary's Parish in Jamesville, we are blessed with a number of folks from the Jamesville area. Our Parish Mission that commits us to be a welcoming and inclusive parish continues to call folks to our spiritual home who just didn't feel welcome in other communities, or felt that the message of the Church was downright hurtful. Our LGBT, Women's' and Disability Taskforces help us to put the words our Parish Mission Statement into real action. Since our opening weekend our figures show an ongoing increase in parish membership. Every person who joins our community – with their faith, gifts and commitment – enriches and transforms our community to become more and more the community we are called to be; and enables the fire of the Spirit to burn brighter within and among us.

2. We've worked very hard these past six years to ensure that our liturgies, homilies, music, Sacramental Programs, ongoing Faith Formation and Enrichment for children and adults, RCIA, etc. support, feed and challenge us more and more to become the people God has created us to be. We are blessed with an amazing staff and volunteer ministers who make these things happen.

3. Jesus makes it so clear in the Gospel and Pope Francis reminds us so often by his words and, more powerfully, his actions that: as Disciples, in our love for each person without exception and without conditions, we should be a Church that has special solidarity and commitment to the poor, the sick and troubled, the oppressed and the marginalized. In these past six years – because of your generosity of time and treasure, we have been able to reach out to those who are hurting locally and globally in amazing ways. These experiences so deeply enrich our community because when we connect with the poor and the lost – we connect with the Face of Christ. Parkside food pantry, the Oxford Inn, St. Lucy’s programs, the Brady Faith Center, Assumption Northside ministries, the Nottingham, Villanueva in Nicaragua, the Starfish Program in the Gambia, the well in Karare, Kenya and Break Margins Africa in Nairobi are just some examples, along with our Legion of Mary and Caring Hands Ministries.

4. A. Because of the funds that we inherited from Our Lady of Solace and St. Therese parishes we have been able to renovate our church and parish center (including the creation of the apartment for our religious Sisters), purchase a small home for the pastor’s residence – as a financial investment, acquire the Bishop Harrison Center from the Diocese renovating the top floors so that we could rent the space to Spiritual Renewal Center and put in a new parking lot --- all without the need to ask parishioners for any extra funds. Remarkable!

B. Because of your generosity, our “ordinary income” – which is primarily our weekly collection – has increased pretty steadily each year and we’re almost at the point where this income is able to take care of our “ordinary expenses” – utilities, staff salaries, Diocesan assessments, etc. But, to this point in time, we continue to have to use our dwindling savings to meet our expenses. Our Finance Committee will address this in their report to us in the near future.

C. I’m happy to announce that we have reached our Hope Appeal Goal for this year as we have every year since we opened! And, in fact, we have just *surpassed* this year’s goal! Again, thank you for your generosity!

Sisters and brothers, looking at where we have been, I think these past six years have been pretty amazing and, as a Parish, we’re off to a pretty amazing start!

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Where is the Spirit leading us as we look toward the future? Our Pastoral Council has done a lot of hard work and planning around this question and I would like to share their recommendations.

1. As we all know, the numbers of priests available for ministry continues to decline sharply and the number of new recruits is very small. There are some obvious solutions to this crisis that, hopefully, the church will look at very soon...; but it’s hard to imagine as we look down the road, that the Diocese will be able to provide a full-time priest for All Saints and for the Syracuse University Campus Ministry at the Alibrandi Center. The Alibrandi Center Board met with a couple of our parish leadership a while ago and both groups suggested that it would be very beneficial for us to begin

working together – sharing a process to plan for the future. Our Pastoral Council strongly recommends that our Parish begin to get more involved with the University community and develop programs for the young adult community. Not only would this step be the best hope to ensure our future as a Parish, but also would enrich our Parish in so many ways.

2. When the Parish purchased the Bishop Harrison Center last Fall – with the strong affirmation of our Council and Parishioners – it was with the dream that the Center would not only be used for the needs of the Parish, but would become a center, open to the greater community. The presence of the Spiritual Renewal Center is a huge step in that direction and a blessing to our Parish, neighborhood and greater community. They have already started connecting with the University and will be offering the joint workshop on Scripture with Hendricks Chapel in late October. Our work is about to begin on renovating the rest of the building, with a new kitchen and bathrooms on the lower level, handicapped accessibility, classroom and office space. We are so thankful to our Pastoral Council and our Jack Ziegler its facilitator, our Doug Arena, Michael Geraghty and our Building & Grounds Committee for pulling this together. Michael has some architectural drawings of what we hope to do on display in the back church. Take a look – it's really exciting!

3. I will be 67 years old in October. (Though, I know, I don't look it!!) While I am healthy now, I've shared with the Council my desire that – in order to remain healthy in the long run – in my second six-year term (if God and the Bishop so desire) I focus more on Sacramental and pastoral ministry, while sharing more of the administrative tasks with staff. I would hope this would be done by developing more of a team leadership approach and we'll look at some models. Any ideas you would have would be appreciated

The Pastoral Council recommends to the Parish, that if these three new directions are to be seriously developed: greater connection with University community, development and administration of the Bishop Harrison Center as a Community Center and the creation of a team approach to our leadership, it will be necessary to hire a new staff person in the capacity of an Outreach Administrator. Through God's grace, we have a person who is not only very capable – but also is very interested!

The Pastoral Council would like your input on these three new directions for our Parish and will be sending us a questionnaire in the near future; the Finance Committee will share with us how we may address these directions from a financial perspective, as well as how to address the repair from serious water damage, dry rot and ant damage to the front of our church building; and construct a new bathroom in the Greeting Area (!) as well as complete the renovation of the Bishop Harrison Center.

A lot happening as we look ahead... let us pray for the guidance the Spirit!

In conclusion, I'd like to share with you, a note I received from the father of a student attending S.U., who wrote after attending one of our Easter liturgies:

Dear Father Daley,

My name is Eric Conway. My son David attends Syracuse University. This past weekend my family and I visited David and we attended your Easter Service. I'm a lifelong Catholic and I've been searching for a congregation that "gets it." Yours clearly does! Thank you for your glorious celebration. Too long I've attended dirges that are rooted in the past. I'd like my parish to have the same Resurrection I saw this past Sunday. You even connected with my 22-year-old daughter who has drifted from the Church. Congratulations to you, your Parish Council and your Congregation. It is truly wonderful.

God bless,
Eric Conway

Amen!