

Dear Parishioners,

I apologize for the change and confusion surrounding the Town Hall Meeting that was changed into a Ministry Fair.

After the Parish Council suggested we have a Town Hall Meeting so that parishioners would have a forum to express their concerns at a question and answer format, I also asked the leadership at the Diocese of Toledo what they thought of the idea. They strongly recommended to us that we not have a town hall meeting. They were concerned that some confidential personnel and administrative decisions might be brought up, and that the tone of the meeting might become angry. I should have allowed the Parish Council members to have monitored the tone of the meeting, filtering inappropriate questions and allowing the many other questions you may have had in mind to be asked. In order to have better communication with you so that you know what is going on in our parish, I am answering every question on this sheet which you submitted in writing.

Hopefully, last week's gathering gave us all a chance to know each other better to and celebrate how many parishioners have been so faithful in serving their parish by means of the different ministries we have. I will count on all of you to consider serving your parish in one of our many ministries. On behalf of the friars, I would like to thank you for your dedicated service to Our Lady of Consolation Parish, Shrine, and School.

1. What is going to happen to Confirmation? Will it still be offered in the seventh and eighth grade?

In listening to your concerns, the Confirmation Program will remain in the seventh and eighth grades, both at OLC School and Parish Religious Education (PRE). Thanks for sharing your concerns about how busy you are as parents. Many of you have children of different ages, and it requires a great deal of planning on your part to transport them to activities which often are scheduled at the same time, but in different places.

As your pastor, and concerned for the spiritual welfare of your children, I feel a great sadness that once your children enter high school, the majority of teens and their families rarely, if ever, attend Sunday Mass. Understandingly, you are all very busy, but you as parents must set the example that God, the church, and our Catholic Faith are the most precious thing in life. Your children will only understand how important that is by making the time each Sunday as a family to attend Mass and receive Holy Communion if you attend Mass as a family. Simply put, "we make the time for what we consider most important in life." It is up to you as parents to seek a reasonable balance in the frequency and type of activities in which your children participate. What you choose to do will help set the priorities for your children.

Finally, keep this in mind. In the 10 parishes where I have served since I was ordained a priest in 1979, the first three of them celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation in the eighth grade. The other 7 (Carlsbad, NM, San Jose, Costa Rica, Bloomington, St. Paul, Richfield and Shakopee, MN and New Albany, IN) all had a two year program beginning the freshmen year of high school and concluding with Confirmation the Sophomore year. This was the standard practice, not only in these parishes, but in their entire (arch)dioceses, and in many dioceses in the United States.

We have a very good two year program for Confirmation:

- 1. Pre-Confirmation-7th Grade*
 - 2. Confirmation-8th Grade. After being confirmed, they will be encouraged to continue Altar serving and/or participate in one of the other ministries of the church. This reminder/suggestion about invitation to the ministries came from one of the parishioners. Thank you.*
 - 3. Post Confirmation-9th grade-an optional program which gives your teen an opportunity to grow in his/her faith in the context of a high school experience through some kind of youth group or mission trip experience. Attendance at youth group is highly encouraged.*
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2. There have been many suggestions and good ideas presented by the parishioners about having a children's Mass once a month. Many of your ideas and suggestions are presented here.
 - a. *The "Children's Mass" will be called "Family Mass". Regardless of age, the entire family will be encouraged to attend together.*
 - b. *The "Family Mass" ordinarily will take place when the children's choir sings, which is generally at a Sunday 9:00 a.m. Mass*
 - c. *Children will be asked to bring their offering to a basket placed at the front of the church. After they have finished, the regular collection will be taken up.*
 - d. *Children and youth will be encouraged to participate more in the Mass.*
 3. Some people had questions about the Air Conditioning Fund. What has happened to the fund? Will air conditioning be installed or not?

The time involved in the removal of the contents of the retreat house and the demolition of the building (now in progress) has temporarily put this project on hold. To date, after two separate consultations with 2 separate architects and engineers, two very different ideas have emerged. One idea is that the interior basilica space is too large for air conditioning and was never designed for it. This engineer recommended a better air circulation system for the movement of air to prevent damage to the plaster and the paintings. The other idea is that Air Conditioning can be installed and is the best way to reduce the heat and humidity that negatively affects the interior. None of the money that has been donated for this project has been spent, except payment for some architectural consultation several years ago. Currently funds in this account have been set aside in a high interest certificate.

Moving forward, we will begin to work on this project after Christmas this year. Also, an important factor in this decision to/to not install air conditioning will be the estimated cost of the electricity and maintenance in operating the system.

4. There were some questions about the confessionals recently installed in the lower church.

1. *There was only a limited, predetermined space in the lower basilica in which to build confessionals.*
2. *There was not enough room to install kneelers and at the same time accommodate those who have mobility issues.*
3. *Large chairs that fit the space easily accommodate older people with mobility needs. There is enough space for them to enter and leave the confessional.*
4. *Even in the "old days" the slide to open or close the door on the screen has always been on the priest's side. Generally, the curtain is closed, and the penitent can request a face to face confession by asking the priest to pull the curtain aside. If you would like to confess face to face, kindly ask, and the priest will open the curtain.*
5. *If the penitent wishes to kneel, we will make sure that there is a pad on which they can kneel. They can also move the chair closer to the wall screen, or move the chair further away in order to kneel.*
6. *Many confessions are longer today. Being able to sit instead of kneel makes it more comfortable for the penitent to engage in a conversation about spiritual matters with the priest.*
7. *The new confessionals are completely soundproofed so as to maintain complete confidentiality and privacy.*
8. *Finally, some important points:*

a. What if the priest knows me? Will he think less of me if he knows my sins?

Because of his sacred ministry of exercising in the person of Christ the forgiveness of sins, the priest will never think less of you; like Jesus, the Good Shepherd, he rejoices when even one sinner repents. What is confessed by the penitent is forgotten quickly by the priest, and of course, being under the seal of confession, he can never divulge what was told to him. We as Catholics believe that the priest is the ordinary minister of all the sacraments (except Confirmation and Holy orders, which is reserved to the Bishop) The experience of the Sacrament of Confession is a completely different experience than simply "telling your sins to God alone."

b. How often should I confess my sins?

Grave or Mortal Sins should be confessed immediately: These would include Murder, or serious violence toward another; Adultery (a married person have sexual relations outside of marriage) Calumny, (Lying to someone which will cause them grave harm.) Fornication, (pre-marital sex.) Missing Sunday Mass habitually.

These are a few examples. Otherwise, I would recommend celebrating the Sacrament 4 times a year-winter, spring, summer, and fall.

c. What are the positive effects of frequent Confession?

1. Peace and knowledge of self and closeness to God. 2. Humility in knowing yourself, both your strengths and weaknesses. 3. A greater sense of direction in your spiritual life.
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5. Concerns were expressed about proper attire and modesty in dress while attending Mass.

In our modern age, there has been an increasing lack of any formality in dress or any enforcement of a dress code. Hopefully, we can educate our families about the importance of dressing respectfully when entering a church. By dressing up, we can set a good example for others. However, it is also important to look beyond the person's appearance, look into their souls, pray for them, and be glad that they are present to worship with us. Hopefully, our attention is fixed more on our own worship of God than being overly concerned how people are dressed. It's important for us to make everyone feel welcome.

6. There was a concern that Riley Patterson, our Business Manager, and his father were awarded the contract for mowing the cemetery this year. Is this a conflict of interest?

When Riley was hired last January, he had not been informed of the history of the cemetery. In spring, the grass in the cemetery was already getting long, and he asked me who was in charge of mowing it. He was given the name of the landscape company that was contracted in 2022. When Riley called them to arrange for a new contract, they told us since they had not heard from us, they assumed we were not going to contract with us for 2023. They had scheduled other clients instead, and would not be able to take care of our cemetery in 2023. Next, Riley contacted another company, who put in their bid, which was higher than the previous company's bid in 2022. It was at that point that Riley mentioned that he and his father had a landscaping company, and they placed their bid, which was lower in price. Since it was late in the season, it was decided that for 2023, the best solution was for Riley and his father to cut the cemetery. They have taken care to trim around the gravestones, and also use a bagger every time to scoop up the grass cuttings. Riley and his father are aware of the possible conflict of interest that may exist, and will not be bidding on a contract to cut the cemetery grass in 2024. The cemetery committee will meet and choose another company to do the work. The goal of the cemetery committee will be to find the best company at the best price. I have been very pleased with the appearance and maintenance of the cemetery this year.

7. What will be the property be used for where the retreat house stood for 106 years?

The demolition company is finalizing its work on the project. Great pains were taken to separate bricks and other landfill materials from metals or anything that could be recycled. The remnants of the building have been crushed as much as possible, and most of it will be taken to abandoned parts of quarries near Carey, and some to Findlay. In accord with EPA regulations, all asbestos or any other hazardous materials were removed. Since the retreat house sat on a considerable rise above street level, 3 of the surrounding trees and the

nature garden, including the no longer used heating oil storage tank were removed in order to provide a more accessible grade sloping down to the sidewalk. Plans to develop the area as a green space with attractive looking picnic shelters and outdoor visiting areas will be developed. Especially when it is rainy or hot, visitors, pilgrims and parishioners will have a much more pleasant outdoor space in which to gather. The Sandstone Franciscan Coat of Arms, the pilgrims' house, and the cornerstone signs and the metal sign have been preserved, as well as the time capsule and its contents will be all be incorporated into some kind of display. Finally, the entire project went very smoothly, and I would like to thank all those individuals who spent so much time saving, reusing or recycling the contents of the retreat house. Thanks to Riley for our Business Manager for dedicating hours and hours working with all those who had a part in recycling metal for OLC school, the auctioneer Doug Walton and the Demolition Company itself, as well as the insurance adjusters and asbestos inspectors. Through the auction, we made \$6,000 from the sale of its contents. Additionally, so many other saved items either are being used by the friars, the school, the parish, and the shrine, resulting in a financial savings for all. Much of the bedding was given to Findlay's and Toledo's homeless shelters. An article with pictures and the history of the retreat house will appear soon in the Progressor-Times.

8. How is the completion of the historical display in the lower basilica coming along?

Since there was no middle school religion teacher last year, I volunteered my time to teach religion classes four times a week during the 22-23 school year. I really enjoyed teaching last year, but understandably it was a huge time commitment, and so the completion of the historical display project was put on hold. As winter approaches, I will definitely have more time to work on it, and include a special section on the retreat house. Many of the historical pictures are already framed and ready to be displayed. I know that all of you have been affected by the demolition of historical churches (such as Alvada & Frenchtown) and other buildings in this area recently. They remind us of so many of our faith experiences and I know how sad this must be for you. I have been through this myself. All of the places I lived or worked since I was ordained in 1979 (with the exception of 1989-1990 until 1991 have either closed, been torn down, or the Conventual Franciscan Friars are no longer there. Lots of 'goodbyes' for all of us. But our faith remains and "Jesus Christ is yesterday, today and forever."

9. Some people asked why the Eucharistic Ministers couldn't stand on the other side of the Communion Rail to give out Holy Communion should someone want to kneel while receiving Holy Communion.

Even if the communicants were to stand just below the step where the communion rail is, most of the Eucharistic Ministers would have to stretch and bend considerably in order to extend the Sacred Host or the chalice filled with the Precious Blood to the communicant, resulting in a greater possibility of dropping the Host or spilling the Precious Blood. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has stated that the ordinary practice of receiving Holy Communion is to be done while standing. In addition, the same document

states that Holy Communion is not to be refused to anyone who chooses to kneel in receiving it. We are following the practice and directions of our U.S. Bishops in this matter.

10. Why was the Oversight Committee formed and what is its responsibility?

The Oversight Committee is a group that was asked to help find solutions to our financial crisis OLC faced in October 2019.

The original members of the group were: Julie Hoepf, from the Finance Committee, Jill Marugg, from the Shrine Board, Mary Klein, from the Shrine Board, and Jenny Wagner, OLC Education Fund/Hilda Jacobs Endowment Fund Trustee. At the time the group formed, there was a \$99,000 shortfall and the group was tasked with helping me understand the finances collectively-Shrine, Parish, and School, as well as to provide for solutions going forward, They advised me on such matters as: new budgets, updating policies and procedures, completing state reports, addressing compliance issues, implementing audit recommendations, and handling contract warranty issues. Financial progress was noted in the bulletin. Although it is a temporary committee, there are still members of this committee to whom I ask for advice and direction on matters that impact OLC as a whole,

11. What is the Role of Parish Council? What is the Role of Finance Council?

The parish council facilitates communication between the pastor and the parishioners. They serve as an advisory board to help the pastor to help foster the growth of spiritual and social activities for the parish. They are an elected board who serve four year terms.

The members of the Finance Council are appointed by the pastor. They are chosen because of their financial, business and administrative experience. There is no limit to their terms.

12. We need more explanation of the meaning of the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Confirmation.

How true! Homilies will be more directed to the explanation and meaning of these two sacraments. During the Season of Lent, evenings of reflection will be scheduled so that we have the chance to better understand these sacraments. There will also be several "teaching Masses" scheduled throughout the year. Tuesday Adoration has been extended to evening hours.

Fr. Thomas Merrill, OFM Conv.
Pastor & Rector