



1100 West Grand River Avenue, Okemos Michigan 48864-3015
(517) 349-1763 / (517) 349-3322
www.st-martha.org

March 25, 2021
Solemnity of the Annunciation

Dear Saint Martha Parish and School community,

What a year it's been.

Over these pages, we can look back on this challenging, daunting, unprecedented year. And we can look forward – insofar as anyone can predict what's coming!

We now know that Covid had been quietly present in our nation before the end of 2019, but it was in March 2020 that the gravity of the situation began to come into view. Yet, even then, we had no idea how bad it would get. A year ago, optimists thought the death toll would be comparable to a bad winter flu, while pessimists predicted the toll in our nation might reach 100,000. It now appears that more than half a million Americans lost their lives to Covid. The worldwide total may never be known.

Several Saint Martha parishioners died as the result of Covid. And other parishioners suffered the death of a family member or close friend. All of us were touched by Covid to some degree, but our prayers and hearts necessarily are focused on those households where death came calling. For too many, the disease was catastrophic. Thus, as we look cautiously to the future, we must not allow ourselves to suppose that we can simply revert to “business as usual.” In appropriate and varied ways, we will need to remember and honor those who were lost to this virus.

In the face of this pandemic, governments instituted restrictions that created several more layers of hardship. The full economic, educational, social, emotional, political, and cultural impact of those measures will be considered for years to come, as will the question of the extent to which a deadly virus – a highly contagious, deadly virus that could pass easily through unknowing, asymptomatic carriers – was, or even could be, effectively contained by those measures. Often lost in the conversation about externally imposed strictures was the personal responsibility of each individual voluntarily to maintain social distance, wear a mask, clean

surfaces, avoid crowds, disinfect hands, respect the choices made by others, and stay home when ill.

And we had a presidential election. And a tumultuous year in so many other respects.

As Catholic Christians, we were stunned last year by the suspension of the public celebration of the Mass from mid-March until the last weekend of May. The live-streaming of Mass provided a link to the parish. However, there is no substitute for the opportunity to gather, as followers of the Way have gathered for two millennia, to hear the Word of God, to pray with and for each other, and to receive the Lord, truly present in the Eucharist. Fortunately, on the weekend of May 30-31, 2020, we resumed the public celebration of the Mass (with suitable safeguards, of course), and have continued without interruption since that date.

As we reflect on the events of this historic year, please know of the remarkable efforts made by your fellow parishioners to keep our parish strong and vibrant during this time of great challenge. Simply offering the Mass from May 2020 forward required masks and distancing, limitations on seating, a wealth of signage and other communication, and a whole new set of cleaning protocols. As suppliers' inventories plunged in the early days of Covid, it was a challenge just to locate the necessary cleaning and safety equipment. Of course, we also halted distribution of Precious Blood, limited the use of Eucharistic Ministers, suspended the participation of servers, and removed the holy water basins (a generous donor responded by funding several cases of individual bottles so we still could provide holy water to parishioners at regular intervals!). Initially, the Sacrament of Reconciliation was offered in the Saint Kateri Room, to optimize spacing. Hymnals vanished, the Eucharist was distributed by clergy going out to the pews, and a second Mass in the gymnasium was offered on Christmas Eve. It has been a remarkable time.

Among the greatest blessings of this past year has been the continued safe operation of Saint Martha School. Back in 2020, when all schools in the state were shuttered, our amazing teachers made a swift transition to distance learning, thus providing ongoing education weeks before neighboring school districts were able to get started. In those months, events like all-school Rosaries, a talent show, and eighth-grade graduation occurred on Zoom. Then, during the current 2020-2021 school year, our teachers, parents, and students have worked together in a manner for which we all should be immensely proud and grateful. It would take pages to supply you with a full listing of all that has been done to maintain consistent in-person classroom instruction. For now, just know that the school was placed in "a bubble" for the safety of all, and the results have exceeded even our best hopes. Occasionally, some students have needed to be home in quarantine (as we fully anticipated when we made the commitment to be open), but the children of this parish have been in school all year! Rigorous new protocols, including daily health screenings, have made this possible. The cooperation of parents has been exemplary, and the children are so much better off in school. Praise be to God!

This letter is my minor contribution to what has been an incredible commitment to maintaining communication and community during these days of Covid. The Holy Spirit thought it would be a good idea to have a Saint Martha Communications Committee in place before Covid hit, so we had outstanding people at the ready. But I have no words to express the gratitude of the parish for what these people – particularly the two co-chairs of the committee – have done for us. Across all platforms, we have seen livestreaming of Masses, the installation and use of professional-grade cameras and electronics, weekly email updates, video presentations, a lively social media presence, and so much more! Three times, we undertook to place a phone call to every parishioner, to make sure everyone was okay, and to collect prayer intentions. More than once, I have been left speechless by the incredible quality of what has come from our Communications Committee.

As we look back on these past twelve months, many other areas of parish life could be examined. Let's mention one in particular – finances. Despite several months of Covid expenses and challenges, last year's 2019-2020 fiscal year finished in the black. During our time of being shut down, we were able to maintain the salaries and benefits of the dedicated employees who serve you so well. Coming out of our shutdown, we made several personnel changes that have permitted us to serve you even more effectively, at a reduced cost. A key to our continued financial health has been the willingness of so many of you to make the transition to on-line giving through our secure and convenient platform. For those who still prefer the use of envelopes, donation safes were placed on three pillars in the back of church, to provide a ready alternative to the physical taking-up of a collection during Mass. As we continue through the current 2020-2021 budget year, we again are on pace to finish in the black.

So let's turn to what may lie ahead for Saint Martha Parish and School. Of course, in the short run, our safety measures will remain in place, just as they have been. Masks and social distancing will continue to be expected of all those attending Mass, and the Bishop has indicated that we still should refrain from distributing the Precious Blood.

As millions of Americans are vaccinated each day, our Mass attendance continues to creep upward. This trend will be given a boost at Pentecost (May 23), when the Bishop's dispensation from Sunday Mass will end. Before long, we likely will need to move to open seating, as a way – perhaps counter-intuitively – to protect social distancing. (Recall when we changed from having one of every three pews open, to having one of every two. That provided more available pews in which to spread out.) With all pews in use (and people sitting at opposite ends of successive pews), we will be able better to space people. We have been one of the few parishes that has taken the Eucharist out into the pews but, if we open all the pews, we will need to resume the customary practice of having people come forward for Communion. Please, however, keep six feet (two pews) apart as you do so.

These elements of worship bring to mind an essential point of parish life. We absolutely must be courteous and respectful to our brothers and sisters, some of whom remain vulnerable to

infection, and others of whom remain quite nervous in public places. As our signs at the entrance remind us, mask-wearing is done in charity and humility, not because the parish has taken a political stance or has gained expertise in the spread of contagious diseases.

Beginning at Easter, when they are available, we will again be using (masked) servers at Mass. Though I have been fully vaccinated, I likely will continue the practice that I follow at school Masses, where I wear a mask when in the immediate presence of the servers.

Going forward, our liturgies will reflect a partial resumption of normalcy, along with a continued close regard for safety. For instance, the distribution and blessing of Palms on Palm Sunday will be a little different, as will the veneration of the Cross on Good Friday. As we wash the feet of twelve volunteers at the Mass of the Lord Supper, we will attend to proper hygiene.

In a recent video, you learned of the plans to hang a Crucifix above the altar and to place a carved image of Saint Joseph (matching the image of Mary) in the sanctuary. You also learned (and you may have heard while walking into church) that the third bell in the bell tower has been repaired, allowing our call to worship to ring out even more clearly. This spring will also see the installation of a memorial to the unborn on one of the grassy islands in the parking lot. The improvements noted in this paragraph will be a blessing, and are being funded by generous donors.

You know that, at the end of 2019, the Parish Pastoral Council (with input from the parish) adopted a Mission Statement, a Vision Statement, and Statement of Values. These have been widely circulated, but the endeavor seemed to drift out of sight in early 2020 as we began our days of Covid. A goal for 2021 and 2022 is for every parish organization to measure itself against these powerful statements. To bring them even closer to mind, they will appear later this spring in one of our hallways, so that we can be reminded of them as we walk past.

As Saint Martha Parish and School moves through this decade that lies before us, we will continue to focus on loving respect and assistance for our elders, and on expanding the parish by making it a most attractive place for young families. The school will grow next year, as we hope to split the lower elementary grades (no more combined grades!) and continue to extend an academically strong and spiritually powerful Catholic education. A glance at any news source, on any day, will demonstrate the need to raise our children in the truth, equipping them for life in a world where fanciful versions of foundational ethical, economic, and other principles seemingly are being invented on a daily basis. Jesus Christ is **THE WAY AND THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE**, and each child needs to know that, to the fullest depth of mind and heart. For those who choose religious education or home schooling as the method for imparting the faith, these programs likewise continue to grow stronger. The coming introduction of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd will powerfully advance the spiritual growth of our youngest children.

Adult education in all its forms – Bible studies, the Holy Family of Bethany speaker series,

an ever-growing parish library – has already returned and will be enhanced as this year continues. And we should continue to share with our families all the lessons learned at Mass and in the Catholic material we enjoy from other sources, both paper and electronic. Going forward in these troubled time, our sense of Domestic Church must continue to grow and develop.

Please stay tuned for information about events, both memorial and in celebration, later this summer. The isolation of Covid has left all of us hungry for shared experiences of remembrance and of joy.

Just a bit more. Please give prayerful consideration, as the parish becomes more active in months to come, of how you would like to assist. There are a host of grace-filled and thoroughly enjoyable ministries at Saint Martha. You can do so much good, and you'll love meeting more of the wonderful people of this parish. Volunteering in the school, serving as a catechist, helping the Matthew 25 work of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, assisting in the office or with the many liturgical ministries (Eucharistic Minister, Lector, sacristan, musician), becoming active in the Knights of Columbus or the Council of Catholic Women – every one of these is satisfying and uplifting.

As mentioned above, the dispensation from the obligation of Sunday Mass will be ending at Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. As we have come to understand in these long months, however, it's not that we *must* go to church, it's that we *can*. The prisons of China and other countries contain men and women who would give anything for a taste of the Eucharist, a drop of Precious Blood. To the best of our abilities, we should avoid permitting this miracle ever to seem routine. Not even angels can receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of the Lord as we can. When the health situation of you and your family permits, please come again to the table of the Lord!

Finally, please allow me to end on a personal note. I'm honored to be your pastor. This is just an amazing parish. The talent, the energy, the good cheer, and, of course, your love of the Lord lift me up every day. Thank you for all you do and all you are!

May God bless you and your families.

Yours in Christ,

Fr Mike

Father Mike Murray