

March 19, 2021 – Solemnity of Saint Joseph

Dearest Parishioners of the St. Michael the Archangel Pastorate,

*Today marks the seven-month date of my arrival to Newton and Jasper County!* I wanted to take this opportunity to connect with everyone, as best as I can, and to communicate some of the successes we've experienced this year and what we can expect in the next several months. As we all know, these seven months have been periodically marked by continued spikes in COVID numbers and various quarantines and other continuing effects to our communities, resulting from the pandemic. In addition, our **Sacred Heart** brothers and sisters experienced the tragedy of a church fire just after Christmas. We've all continued to adapt to the new pastorate structure. Lastly, for myself, finding the balance in my responsibilities and obligations between our three parishes, three cemeteries and an elementary school. With all of this I want to say "**Thank You**". This has been a unique year in so many ways that it's becoming hard to even keep track of where we are on the spectrum of what's "normal"; **thank you** for persevering against adversity and **thank you** for committing yourself to keep strong in the Faith when it would be so easy to throw in the towel.

While it is not always easy to see nor something that is always easy to communicate or promote, we have been working hard in the office to streamline our operations and to make the most effective use of our combined pool of time, talents and treasures within our pastorate. As you are all aware *Mrs. Marie Oliver* was brought on in November, at the recommendation of a hiring committee made up of members from each parish, to be our first **Director of Operations** for our Pastorate. She has been integral in working with the diocese to implement any processes and controls we were lacking as well as maintaining best practices tracking our finances, together with the assistance of *Mrs. Nancy Goodwin*, to ensure that we are maintaining financial standards and that your generous stewardship is being protected and directed to benefit the parishes as best as possible. To that end, we are currently wrapping up our mandatory year end financial reporting to the diocese and I intend to be presenting a financial report for each parish in the upcoming weeks.

I believe our parishes have benefited from having people join in prayer and worship at Mass or Stations of the Cross or Penance services, as we have come together to pray to God as One Body on several occasions. I remember the special Mass on January 22<sup>nd</sup> on the National Day of Prayer for the Protection of the Unborn in the evening at **St. Augustine**, in which there were parishioners from each parish present, coming together to pray for the unborn and to witness to our collective witness to the Gospel of Life. I also enjoy our Saturday evening Masses at **Sts. Peter and Paul** where every week members from each parish are always present and truly representing the beautiful unity of our Catholic faith and the oneness of our worship. I hope we can continue to come together and pray together, as a family of believers, even if it's not "our church" building, but recognizing that this is our Church and Christ and Catholicism is not restricted to an address on a map or a building on a street. I am grateful for the transition we've been able to make, due to the fire, and to have Sunday morning Mass at **Sts. Peter and Paul**, for the time being, while **Sacred Heart** undergoes restoration.

I am excited about the upcoming opportunities that are coming up as we can begin to see the beginning of the end of the pandemic. I am eagerly anticipating being able to build personal relationships with you all, without six-foot distances and barriers between us. I intend to work with our *Pastorate Council/Vision Planning Team* to begin planning a kind of "re-opening celebration", when the time is right, to celebrate our perseverance through this time and to rejoice in each other's company. In the meantime, I hope we can continue to keep our beloved traditions alive, even in some modified form, until we can truly be without restriction.

We are also moving full-steam ahead with making sure we recover from last year, especially in regards to religious education and sacramental preparation. The education in the Faith of our youngest members is of utmost importance to me as Pastor. I have worked with our committed volunteer catechists and leaders to examine our programs, build on our strengths and to shore up our weaknesses. For example, our Confirmation

preparation program has been totally revamped and is moving ahead to help our teenagers prepare, not just for the Sacrament of Confirmation, but perhaps more importantly, to be more active and involved members of our parishes during their high school years and to carry this engagement into the rest of their lives, as God calls them to marriage, the priesthood, religious life or the missions. I would like to thank *Mrs. Sarah Hall* at **Sacred Heart** and *Dr. Jack Drone* and *Mrs. Kris Dobson* at **St. Augustine** who have been so instrumental in the good foundations we have here and their willingness to identify the opportunities for growth, thank you!

**St. Augustine Catholic School** is a valuable resource for our community and an essential piece to our pastorate. I often tell my brother priests that it's as if I'm really pastor of four parishes because **St. Augustine Catholic School** is like its own parish in its uniqueness and the focus and attention that it deserves and demands from me as pastor. The education of our youth in the faith, as I mentioned above, is of utmost importance for me as a priest and as pastor this is one of my primary duties. We are blessed to have such committed and caring teachers and staff and a wonderful principal, *Mrs. Angela Nagel*, who work hard everyday to ensure the best quality education we can provide and to ensure we are fulfilling our mission and preserving and promoting our Catholic identity. We are also working diligently to make this school one that not only are we proud of, but one that is thriving both in terms of enrollment as well as financially. There are many great opportunities in both areas and I ask for the continued support of the entire pastorate in both areas to help keep this vital part of our shared Catholic Faith an enduring legacy for the future.

There are many other good things that I could spend pages and pages to report, here are but a few:

- I've heard stories of people who have had profound encounters with God's mercy in confession
- We've had a great response and are wrapping up our first Pastorate Bible Study
- I've helped several people begin the annulment process and the process of healing
- I've finally been able to visit some nursing homes and bring the sacraments to people who have been quarantined for nearly a year
- I've baptized several new members to our Catholic Faith during these few short months
- We celebrated Confirmation in October at St. Augustine with Bishop Doherty

As we move forward, we will continue to examine and re-examine ourselves and constantly seek out areas for growth and improvement as well as identifying those strengths that we can draw from and leverage to continue the mission of Christ's Church here on Earth. One glaring need that we have and one that we will be addressing within the next quarter is our need to engage Catholic's who have fallen away from the Church and to invite and welcome those considering the Catholic Faith for the first time. We will begin advertising for a **Director of Evangelization** position for the Pastorate as a position focused on not only reaching out to those needing or seeking the Catholic Faith, but also helping me in my priestly ministry, to effectively communicate and teach the faith at all levels and to all ages within our community. As we continue to endure the current priestly vocational shortage, this **Director of Evangelization** will be an aid to help me in my role as pastor in teaching, preaching and sanctifying. I look forward to being able to announce this position as soon as we are able to find the most suitable candidate for our pastorate.

As I mentioned above, there have been a lot of changes and this year has been one that no one could have ever anticipated just over a year ago, and yet we find ourselves here, and we made it. Thank you for your continued prayers and encouragement you've offered me in my seven months. Please know that, as I mentioned in my first homily, my singular purpose is to help you get to heaven. I know I'm not perfect but I do sincerely try and to keep this goal always at the fore. Please continue to keep me in your prayers and please continue to pray for our pastorate through the intercession of St. Joseph, during this year dedicated to him and through his patronage, might we indeed achieve God's goal for each of us and become saints in heaven.

Fr. Bennett