

***State of the Parish
February 8/9, 2014
Father Frank Matera***

Every once in a while it is helpful to review where we have been, where we are, and where we want to go. For example, in two weeks the Finance Committee will give you a report about the financial state of St. Mary's Parish: where we are and where we would like to be. But this weekend, I want to speak about the spiritual life of St. Mary's: who we are; what we are doing; what we can become.

Statistics: St. Mary's is a large parish. Our recent census shows we have 1752 registered households with a population of 5387. On a typical weekend, our Mass attendance fluctuates between 900 and 1000 people, a number that swells to over 2000 at Christmas. We had a confirmation class of 91 this past year and a first communion class of 72. The number of children baptized in 2013, however, was 37, a sign of changing demographics and of the challenges we face to grow our parish community.

Liturgy: One of the distinguishing characteristics of St. Mary's is the number of people involved in the life of the parish. On a typical Sunday, for example, it takes a total of 56 altar servers, ushers, lectors and Eucharistic ministers to carry out our four liturgies. If we add organists, choir members, cantors, deacons, and priests, as well as those who clean altar linens, provide flowers for the altar, and count our collections that number swells to 100.

The liturgies we celebrate are prayerful and reverent. But our congregational singing needs improvement. We are still singing like Catholics, which means that many of us are not singing at all. *The first goal I propose for the coming year, then, is to increase the number of parishioners who participate in our congregational singing.* So whether or not you have a good voice, please join us in raising a joyful voice of praise to the Lord.

Education: Education plays an important role in our parish, and St. Mary's School is an integral part of our mission to preach and teach the gospel. While the majority of our 218 students come from the parish, St. Mary's also draws upon the greater Farmington Valley. Our school maintains high academic standards and is committed to forming students in the Catholic faith. While the school is presently in a good financial situation, we need to maintain and grow its population. *And so the second goal I set for the coming year is to increase the student population of St. Mary's School from our own parish population.*

In addition to St. Mary's School, we have a good religious education programs for 638 students who attend public school. This past year we moved our religious education program for grades 1-6 from Squadron Line to St. Mary's School, and we inaugurated a new program called "Edge" for our middle school youth and "Life Teen" for our high school youth.

The move from Squadron Line to St. Mary's has gone smoothly, and I am grateful for those who made it possible. We have two sessions before and after the 9:30 AM Mass on Sunday, and that Mass has become our largest service. *My third goal for the coming year is to*

strengthen our religious education program for middle and high school students and increase the number of religious education students who attend mass on the weekend.

St. Mary's offers several adult enrichment programs. Deacon Art holds Bible Studies on Wednesdays. I offer adult enrichment series during Lent and in the fall, and we now have a vibrant adult enrichment series before and after the 9:30 AM Mass in the Parish Center. In addition to these programs, there are bible and prayer groups that meet at the church and in homes. All told, there are about 150 people involved in our adult enrichment programs. *My fourth goal during the coming year is to involve more people, especially at our Sunday enrichment programs.* But this can only be achieved if there is a change of thinking on our part; namely, an understanding that adult enrichment is not a luxury in the Christian life but something we must do to grow in the Christian life.

Outreach: One of the most distinguishing marks of St. Mary's is its charitable outreach to others. This means that St. Mary's is not a community turned in on itself. It is a community that heeds the gospel mandate to reach out to those in need. Let me give you a statistic that may surprise you. Last year St. Mary's contributed \$287,000 in charity: \$212,000 to the AAA, \$57,000 through its second collections, and \$18,900 from the Parish Charity collections we take up at Christmas and Easter. To belong to St. Mary's is to belong to a giving community.

In addition to charitable giving, St. Mary's reaches out through its twenty Stephen Ministers who counsel others in times of crisis, its extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist who bring Communion to the homebound, its Giving Tree at Christmas time, its Prayer Shawl Ministry, its Prayer Line, its work with Mercy Shelter, the food cards it distributes, as well as social events such as Granny's Attic, the Spring Carnival, and the St. Patrick's Day Dinner. *My fifth goal for the coming year is to increase the percentage of parishioners who participate in charitable giving and charitable ministries.*

Facilities: Last summer, we held a parish retreat for the members of the Parish Council, Finance Council, and School Board to draw up a strategic plan for St. Mary's. A number of committees are presently working on ways to achieve the goals of that retreat meeting. One of these committees is dealing with the challenge of space and facilities at St. Mary's. For while we have a large plant, we lack adequate meeting space. The Facilities Working Group is addressing this problem and will present us with some proposals in the months ahead. *My sixth goal, then, is to find a way for us to have more and better gathering and meeting space so that we can grow as a parish community.*

Evangelization: Lastly, I want to say a word about evangelization. While we have more than 5000 registered parishioners, only twenty percent of them join us in the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, and many no longer attend Mass even on Easter and Christmas. Although they do not worship with us, they remain our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we must find a way to reach out to them. But if we are to do this, we must be a welcoming non-judgmental community that lives in the joy the gospel we proclaim. Each of us must adopt the spirit of Pope Francis who describes the church as a field hospital for the sick and the wounded, a place where all are

welcome because all of us are sinners in need of healing. *My seventh goal for the coming year then is to begin the process of reaching out to those who have been alienated from the church.*

It is a grace for me to serve as your pastor with Fr. Santiago and Deacon Art, whose ministries enrich this parish. I am indebted to the members of the Parish and School Staff who make it possible for this parish run every day. I am also grateful the members of the Parish Council, the Finance Committee, and the School Board who assist me in the oversight of this parish. This is a very good parish, and together we can make it even better.