

January 5, 2006

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

As you already know, our parish has three deacons: Frank D'Ambrosio, Al Murphy and Chuck Clough. What you might not know is that two men from our parish are studying to be deacons: Bill Reed and Gregory Burch. This coming weekend (January 14/15) the scriptures offer us a good opportunity to present Bill and Gregory to the community and to invite your prayer for them. This will take place at the 5:00 Mass on Saturday, January 14 and at the 11:30 Mass on Sunday, January 15th.

As a new year begins I thought it might be helpful to offer a few suggestions I hope will help us celebrate Mass together more fruitfully. If you have other suggestions, I'd be happy to receive them and pass them on in this space. You can send suggestions to FrAustinFleming@aol.com or 55 Church Street, Concord, MA 01742.

How to get a parking space for Mass! That's easy: arrive a little early for Mass and you'll find a parking space right at the church! Arriving early will also give you time to get settled, pray or take a look at the scripture readings for the day – a great way to understand the readings better when they are proclaimed. The homily is based on the scripture readings: missing one or two (or all three!) readings is the liturgical equivalent of arriving at the theater 15-20 minutes into the movie. And the more folks there are who arrive on time, the fewer folks there will be who are distracted by late arrivals.

“What can I bring?” When going to another's home for dinner we often ask the host, “What can I bring? A salad, dessert, a bottle of wine?” Coming to the Lord's Supper allows us the same kind of opportunity to be generous. There are baskets at the church doors **every** week for collecting nonperishable food items for the poor. How helpful it would be if more parishioners would ask themselves before leaving for home for Mass, “What can I bring? tuna? peanut butter? canned soup? a box of pasta?” What a wonderful habit to develop - especially in families with children!

You Are Now Entering A Prayer Zone! Many of those who arrive early for Mass do so in order to spend some quiet time in prayer. Unfortunately, their quiet time is often disturbed by others who are visiting and chatting with their neighbors in pews around the church. (You'd be amazed and embarrassed at how your conversation carries when there are only a small number of people in church before Mass!) We have an ample gathering space in which parishioners can greet and visit, leaving the main body of the church free and quiet for prayer. Please also give a respectful listening ear to our musicians who often prepare prelude music to help us enter into a prayerful spirit. Closer to the time for Mass to begin, the hustle and bustle of folks arriving cannot be avoided but those who come early should have the option of a quiet place and time for prayer. Try it: you'll like

it!

Sorry: you cant' get there from here! Or so it may seem! Picture this: unavoidable circumstances have made you a few minutes late for Mass and you've entered on one side of the church only to find the seats there filled, but you spy some free spaces on the other side of the sanctuary. Can you get there from here? Of course! But it will be best to wait for an appropriate moment: just as the assembly is seated after the opening prayer, or between the readings (but not *during* a reading), or when all stand to sing the Alleluia before the gospel (and if this is when you're arriving – see the first item above!) Soon we will invite our ushers to be more active in helping people find seats and that should alleviate some of the problem. Until then, here's a hint: walking calmly across the sanctuary is much less distracting than bending low and loping across in a hurry!

“Can you hear me now?” The time to shut off one's cell phone (or at least to mute it) is when you're still in your car before coming into church. There are many things that distract us in prayer and one of the easiest distractions to remedy is the ringing cell phone. There was a time, maybe three years ago, when a ringing cell phone in church may have been curious or even funny. That time has passed.

Say what? A great way to have a better understanding of the Sunday scriptures is to preview them. You can access the Sunday (and daily) readings online at the parish website HolyFamilyConcord.org or the US Bishops website USCCB.org Or arrive early enough to read over the scripture lessons in the pew books before Mass begins!

Want Mass to be shorter? No problem! The best way to “shorten” Mass is to participate in it. (The worst way to “shorten” Mass is to leave early.) Time always passes more quickly when we are engaged in what's happening around us and more slowly when we are passive observers. Mass at Holy Family Parish generally lasts about one hour. The Lord gives us 168 hours every week and asks us to return one of those hours in celebrating the Eucharist with the church community. That leaves us with 167 hours every week. If something special is happening at Mass (for example, a baptism) Mass may run an extra five minutes - leaving “only” 166 hours and 55 minutes for the rest of the week. More active participation -responding, singing, listening to the scriptures and homily with inquiring minds, quietly voicing our own needs and concerns in prayer- makes us part of the worship the church is offering. Mass is not a boring routine but those who routinely sit and wait for it to be over have found a surefire way to be bored.

Children should be seen AND heard - in prayer! I'm asked this question by parents of little children and by others whose children are all grown up. My answer for both groups is the same: children of all ages are always welcome at Mass at Holy Family Parish. Parents, of course, have a responsibility to do all they can to help their children learn appropriate behavior for church and to tend to their children when their actions or voices become distracting. Other folks need to remember how difficult this task can be for parents and, in a spirit of Christian love, be understanding when there are problems. We

have published the *Holy Family Parish Children's Mass Book* which is available through the parish office. (In light of this and beginning next week, the children's bulletins will be available as a take-home at the end of Mass.) At the 9:30 Mass on Sundays, children have the option to attend an age appropriate Liturgy of the Word in the chapel in church basement. And if needed, the gathering space on parking lot side of the church and the room by the choir are available to parents and children. Jesus reprimanded his disciples when they tried to shoo the children away from him and so we want to make every effort to welcome children and their parents while at the same time inviting parents to make every effort to help their children become part of the worshipping community.

“Mom, I have to go...” I grew up in Danvers and worshipped at St. Mary's Church from the time of my First Communion through Confirmation. I had no idea if there was a rest room in that church or not - nor did the 300+ children who attended the 9:00 Children's Mass and stayed 45 minutes afterwards for catechism lessons taught right in the pews. How times change... Well, we do have restrooms in our church, two located off the gathering space (a women's room in the short hallway by the sacristy and a men's room in the sacristy) and two in the basement of the church. These restrooms are for those who, on occasion, may have need of them. It won't hurt to point out (and to teach our children) that a “bathroom break” is not part of the Roman Rite for celebrating Mass. (As the church at large and our own parish seek to provide an ever-safer environment for our children, I would urge parents not to allow their children to make unaccompanied trips to the restrooms. The *only* thing that prompts such a comment is my responsibility as a pastor for providing a safe and secure environment for all parishioners.)

Reach out and touch someone – or not! There are two concerns here and I'll address them in order. 1) There may be some parishioners who, at the Kiss of Peace, are reluctant to shake hands because they have a cold or have been sick or during Mass unavoidably coughed into an open hand. If recent illness is a serious concern, an appropriate gesture would be to fold one's hands over one's chest and bow one's head to one's neighbor at this time. Better weather and the end of the cold and flue season should remedy this problem in a few months. 2) Over the past several years I have noticed an increasing number of parishioners in the Communion line greeting their friends and neighbors on the aisle seats as they pass by them. When in procession to receive the Eucharist (or having returned to one's place after having received Communion) the appropriate participation is joining in singing the Communion song. This is not a time to greet others, regardless of how warm and friendly that might seem. Nor is it a time to offer a greeting to the Minister of the Eucharist: the only appropriate response to the Minister's words when presenting the Body and Blood of Christ is “Amen.” Please do not think I have singled out one or two parishioners by making this comment: I offer it precisely because it is a growing custom on the part of many.

What's your hurry? It's truly a shame to see so many parishioners exit Mass directly from the return line from Communion. This shows a *serious* lack in understanding of, and reverence and respect for, the sacrament of the Eucharist. It also offers an extremely poor example to our children and young people. We all know that it is rude to “eat and

run” from the table. This is especially true at the Table of the Lord’s Supper. In Communion we receive the very life Christ offered for us once on the Cross and shared with us now in the Eucharist. To walk away from this fumbling for one’s car keys borders on sacrilege. To take one’s time, to return to one’s seat, to pray and ponder the Mystery we have celebrated and received might be the few minutes that color with grace and hope the 167 hours left in the week ahead of us.

Here’s the latest update (1/5/06) on our **Grand Annual Collection**:

Goal: \$200,000
Received: \$113,130 (57% of goal)
Contributing
households: 232 (20% of registered households)

I’ll be writing more about the Grand Annual in next week’s letter...

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming