

November 4, 2005

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

At a recent meeting of our Parish Pastoral Council, there was a discussion of the state of affairs in the Archdiocese of Boston and how that impacts Catholic parish life here in Concord. I mentioned to the Council members how often I hear people say, “Well, Father, I just don’t pay attention anymore to the ones who run the archdiocese. My connection to the Catholic church is just here in the parish.” Nick Pollack, our youth representative to the Council asked, “But that’s not really Catholic, is it?” And of course Nick is correct. One of the hallmarks of Catholicism is that universal network of faith, tradition and mission which unites us to the Catholic community around the world, to its ministries and administration, to all those who have gone before us and, in a real way, to the generations of Catholics who will come after us.

While I understand and often share the frustration many have with the administration of our faith tradition, it is a contradiction in terms to call ourselves Catholic and at the same time separate ourselves from the larger Catholic experience – and large it is! Our Church cannot be reduced to a few simple common denominators: neither the genius nor the whole truth of Catholicism can be captured by the text of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. While our Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life, even it does not exhaust all the ways in which God reaches into our hearts and lives of humankind. Although we believe that the Church is the Body of Christ alive and at work in the world, we know that Christ’s divinity and power are not confined to Church structures. The universality of Catholicism is precisely that: universal. And our faith is one that has been shared over several millennia of history and culture, infused with the breath of the Holy Spirit and covered with the fingerprints of those who have passed it on, through sin and grace, from generation to generation. This is the Catholicism from which we cannot isolate ourselves as individuals or as a parish.

My work as a pastor includes serving as a ministerial and administrative link between the local parish and (through the bishop and the archdiocese) the universal church. If you think of me as a circuit breaker, there’s a powerful amount of electricity that passes through my ministry and my office as pastor! I’m not alone in this work –our parish staff absorbs a lot of voltage, too- but my appointment as pastor gives me a unique responsibility in this regard. Two concerns have recently brought this to the fore. The first is mentioned above: the tendency of some Catholics to want to “secede from the union” of the larger Church for any number of reasons and hurts. The second is the question of gathering signatures for the initiative petition to put the question of the definition of marriage on the ballot in Massachusetts. A little background on that will offer some perspective.

On September 1, Archbishop O’Malley wrote to the pastors of the archdiocese “to encourage parish cooperation in the campaign” for collecting signatures in support of the initiative petition for a constitutional amendment. The Archbishop told the pastors that “it is permissible for signatures to be collected at parish Masses or to insert copies of the signature petition in your parish bulletin should you wish to do so.” The Archbishop also indicated that further assistance would be available from the Massachusetts Catholic Conference (the Mass. Catholic Bishops’ lobby for public policy and programs). In other communications, the Archbishop asked pastors to make available copies of a brochure from the Mass. Catholic Conference and a letter from the Archbishop to the people of the Archdiocese. (As I have announced or written on four weekends, copies of the brochure and letter are available at the doors of our church.) Although many faith communities named a Sunday in October as the day for signing the petitions, the Archbishop’s letter outlined September 1 through November 18 as the window of opportunity.

As I wrote some weeks back, I believe there are many other family life issues around which the bishops might more profitably invest their efforts and invite ours, but this is the one they have chosen.

Some parishioners have asked me if there will be an opportunity to sign the petition here at Holy Family. One emailer inquired as to whether or not the parish was being “disenfranchised.” That question came to frame my thinking about the initiative petition. While I feel no responsibility to provide the parish with petitions headed by the seal of the Commonwealth and the signature of the State Secretary, I do have a responsibility to represent the Archbishop and his concerns to our local parish. I do not believe I have a right to impede you from accepting an invitation from your bishop. There are many elements in the life of the Catholic Church with which I struggle, too, but if I am to remain faithful to the Catholic experience, as our young Parish Councilor correctly understands it, then I need to avoid being arbitrary in the decisions I make. Thus, there will be an opportunity on the weekend of November 12/13 for Concord residents in our parish to sign the initiative petition. *(The petitions must be segregated by town and certified by town clerks. In light of the fact that people from a number of towns worship here, Concord residents will be invited to sign the petitions which will be sent to the Office of the Concord Town Clerk. Residents of other communities will be invited to take a signature form home to sign and present at their respective Town Clerk’s office.)*

Just as I have received criticism to what I have written regards the church’s ministry to gay and lesbian people, I expect that I will receive criticism now for making the petition available for signing: different kinds of “current” pass through the pastor’s circuit breaker. It might be helpful to offer a few thoughts “for the record.”

- I hope and pray that persons on both sides of the religious and political issues here will respond in a Christian and civil manner.

- Other than the communications all pastors have received, I have received no particular instructions on this question from the Archdiocese.

- Signing the petition is not required of Catholics by the Church. Like all citizens, Catholics are invited to consider it.

- I hope that the gay and lesbian members of our parish (and town) know that they have my deep support and acceptance and I pray that they will continue to trust my welcome of them in our parish.

- While I believe it is my responsibility as your pastor to provide you an opportunity to respond to the Archbishop’s request, I, like you, enjoy the option to sign or not to sign the petition.

Please pray for me as I continue to grow in the work that is mine as the pastor of Holy Family Parish.

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming

Just as I was about to have this letter duplicated for the bulletin, I read in this morning’s paper that Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Boston is reviewing its policy of allowing adoptions by same-sex couples. To say that such adoptions are “gravely immoral,” a form of “violence” directed at children, convinces me that those who make such statements have never met such an adoptive family nor experienced the self-giving love one can find there. The “voltage” that passes through a pastor’s work is nothing compared to the shock that such language inflicts on good Catholic people living their faith and sharing it with their adopted children.