

March 7, 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This letter follows up on last week's look at Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life report titled *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*. I paired a summary of the study with a 10-year comparison of statistics for the Archdiocese of Boston on church membership and sacramental life in parishes. (You can access last week's letter on the parish website HolyFamilyConcord.org. A post on my blog presents the same at ConcordPastor.blogspot.com where you can also link directly to the Pew Forum website.)

The numbers are unsettling but they also provide a broader context for understanding declining numbers in the Catholic community. As significant as is the impact of the sexual abuse crisis and the closing of parishes, the study shows that there is a general national context which affects virtually all faith groups.

In 1998 there were **8,896** weddings celebrated in the Archdiocese of Boston. In the year 2,007, following an annual decline over the previous decade, the number of weddings in the Archdiocese was only **4, 213**, fewer than half as many 10 years ago. In the same period, infant baptisms in the Archdiocese dropped from **30,110** to **17,360**. I'm no statistician but I would wager a guess that as fewer Catholics choose to celebrate their weddings in the Catholic Church, the likelihood of those same couples presenting their children for baptism is also likely to decline. Of course we know that across the board many young couples choose to live together without benefit of civil or ecclesial sanction and that many couples plan small families – or no children at all. Whatever the reasons behind them, these numbers are cause for alarm.

Alan Wolfe, the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College wrote: *The idea that this country can return to an era in which God commanded and people obeyed is impossible, not because secular people demand control over the decisions that affect their lives, but because religious people do as well.* (Boston Globe: 2/22/08, p. A15)

My own experience as a Catholic priest over nearly 35 years is that many Catholic people increasingly make decisions about how they live their lives independent of their Church's teachings and expectations in both small and large matters. Without a doubt, the national and local numbers I quoted in my letter last week reflect a crisis in church membership but a more critical issue is the deeper one: strong membership numbers were once the product of the Church's authority over peoples' lives but that authority no longer has the muscle it once flexed.

It may be rightly said that the abuse crisis and anger over parish closings have contributed to this crisis. True enough. But there is a broader, cultural secularization in the air we all breathe. That climate, in which personal autonomy trumps all authority, is the one in which we are raising our children. (My homily last weekend, on the cure of the man born blind (available on the parish website) attempted to get at this very issue.

Your pastor has no great solutions to these problems. Our parish experiences these realities in very real ways. However, a ray of hope shone locally last Saturday (through the falling snow) at a parish meeting including representatives from the Parish Pastoral Council, the Parish Staff, the Parish Finance Council and the many commissions, committees and ministries in our faith community. The

purpose of the meeting was to look to the future with an awareness of the “state of the union” in the Church universal, in the American Church, in the Archdiocese and in Holy Family Parish. The Archdiocesan Pastoral Planning Report (about which I have written in this space) was a significant basis for our meeting while the release of the Pew Forum study and the Archdiocesan stats was timely for our purposes. Our parish is but 3 years old and it’s time for us to do some serious planning and goal setting as we, with the whole Archdiocese, face a future with many uncertainties. There will be many opportunities for broader based participation in this process and I hope you will take all of these seriously enough to join in our efforts.

And here are some more interesting facts and figures...

Have you realized how early Easter is this year? Easter is always the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox (March 20). (This dating system is similar to the one by which the Jewish faith calculates the date of Passover.)

It is possible Easter can actually be one day earlier (March 22) but that is rare. This year is the earliest Easter any of us will ever see the rest of our lives. And only the very senior members of our faith have ever seen it this early (those 95 years or older). And none of us presently living will ever see it a day earlier.

- 1) The next time Easter will be this early (March 23) will be the year 2228, or 220 years from now.
- 2) The last time Easter was this early (March 23) was 1913.
- 3) The next time Easter will fall on its earliest possible date (March 22) will be in the year 2285 or 277 years from now.
- 4) The last time Easter was on March 22 was in 1818. So, no one alive today has or will ever see it any earlier than this year.

But more important than all of that is this year’s Holy Week Schedule which you will find on a special insert in this bulletin!

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming

A Silent Prayer Group

Do you long for quiet in the midst of your busy life? Do you have things to say to God, things you’d like to listen for in your heart but find you can’t carve out the time in your schedule to sit quietly and pray for any length of time? These things are true for many, and there just may be other who would like to share time in silent prayer, in a sacred space, with other Catholics.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.”

Gathering to pray, in silence, can be a powerful and affirming experience. Please consider coming together with others for a time of peaceful, candle-lit, silent prayer in the children’s room in church. Afterward, there could be short time for sharing and discussion. A possible schedule for this would be on a weeknight at 8:30pm about twice a month. However, the time is flexible if more people could make it earlier or later. The first

meeting would be introductory and last about 45 minutes. You are most welcome to come see if it seems right for you.

If you are interested, please contact: Meighan Matthews 781-275-4447 or meighanmatt@yahoo.com

The fruit of silence is prayer
the fruit of prayer is faith
the fruit of faith is love
the fruit of love is service
the fruit of service is peace.
- *Mother Theresa*