

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

April 11, 2007

Holy Week was a time of praise, grace and blessing in our parish community. Those who participated in the Triduum liturgies (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil) will know best and first hand the depth and riches of the Catholic tradition at this peak of the liturgical year.

As I watched parishioners wash each other's feet on Holy Thursday I was particularly struck by the children I saw washing their parent's or sibling's feet. What a wonderful memory was in the making as they performed this simple, humble task. Perhaps this practice will yield generations of Catholics whose memories will keep them coming to this beautiful liturgy. The procession with the Eucharist from the upstairs church to the chapel downstairs was a clear sign of the community accompanying Christ as from the upper room of his last supper to the garden where he prayed for strength to take the cup of suffering that was to be his. The chapel filled with parishioners in the light of the altar's candelabra was a scene of reverence and peace.

The children's service at 3:00 on Good Friday gathered close to a full house of worshippers of all ages, though most were youngsters. The children's attentiveness was beyond expectation and their reverence in coming to venerate the Cross was another moment of memory making that I hope will keep these young Christians coming to Holy Week services as they grow up. At this service, and at the 9:30 Mass on Easter our children's choir lifted our voices and hearts to God as only they can do! The evening liturgy of the Passion of the Lord was stark, moving, and focused on the Cross of the Savior. As four women carried the Cross in procession to the sanctuary, one could not help but think of the faithful women who stayed their post at the Lord's feet as he hung on the Tree of Life for our sins. Watching parishioners come to venerate the Cross and having the privilege of knowing the ways in which many of them share the burden of the Cross in their lives is an annual blessing for me as a pastor.

In the chill of Saturday night, we gathered on the plaza and steps of the parking lot end of the church to light the new fire, to stand and pray for a few moments in its light and heat and finally to light from it the Paschal Candle which led us into the church, tapers aglow everywhere, for the great Easter Vigil. Although we had no baptisms at this year's Vigil, the prayer was solemn, joyful, beautiful and revealing of the Risen One among us. Our parish musicians have been preparing for some time for the Triduum liturgies and their ministry was an invaluable part of these days of special prayer.

The liturgies on Easter Sunday morning saw large crowds, with overflow congregations at 9:30 and 11:30. It's real joy to see so many "come home" for Easter! I've already met two individuals "on the street" who shared with me that they had come to Easter Mass at Holy Family after having been away for a number of years: they were filled with gratitude for the community and uplifting prayer they found in the liturgy. Pray with me that God's Spirit will move in the hearts of many to renew their relationship with our Sunday assembly. And on Easter Sunday night, the Triduum closed with Evening Prayer. Paschal Candle, tapers, song, prayer, chant and a simple candle light procession to the baptismal font for a blessing made this the perfect end to the prayer we began on Holy Thursday night.

My thanks to our music ministry, our lectors and ministers of communion, our altar servers, flower folks, ushers and sacristans for all their work in making our Holy Week a time of grace and blessing! I hope that what I've written here might lead those of you who have never participated in the Triduum liturgies to think about doing so next Easter. It is a shame that many Catholics die without ever having shared in these most holy days of the Church year. Yes, these are lengthy liturgies but I hear so many people comment that these unique and beautiful rituals are so captivating that the time passes very quickly. The Easter season lasts for seven weeks, 50 days culminating with Pentecost: Happy Easter!

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming

P.S. *An essay on aging is on the reverse side of this letter.*

Your Pastor: On Turning 60

One spring evening when I was about 10 years old I hopped on my bike to ride to the library. Approaching the Peabody Institute on the shore of the Mill Pond in Danvers I saw that there were cars parked everywhere and I wondered what was the reason. Then I saw that on the large expanse of lawn next to the library the Danvers High School commencement exercises were taking place. I'd never been to a graduation and was wide-eyed at the procession of seniors in cap and gown marching to their seats to the strains of the high school band playing *Pomp and Circumstance*. The graduates seemed, in my 10 year old imagination, to be very mature and grown up. I knew that something important was taking place and I recall wondering if I would ever live so long as to graduate from high school. It wasn't that I had a life-threatening illness, it just seemed to me that high school graduation was eons away and I wondered if I'd make it to such a rite of passage.

Well, I was graduated from Bishop Fenwick High School in 1965; earned a B.A. in philosophy (1969) and an M.Div. in pastoral ministry from St. John Seminary (1972); and earned an M.A. in liturgical studies from the University of Notre Dame (1980). I lived through four graduation ceremonies! And now another significant rite of passage faces me: I turn 60 years old this week.

I don't approach my 60th birthday with any fear, trepidation or sense of trauma. I'm one of those folks who doesn't think the "number" is important. On the other hand, I don't recall writing an essay on turning 59 so I suppose I do attach some special significance to completing my 6th decade. I've realized for some time now that if I had raised a family it's likely that by now I would be a grandfather. That gives one pause... not because it isn't a wonderful thing to be a grandfather, but because fathering and grandfathering clearly announce one's position on the generational ladder and in many ways, I don't think of myself as having yet reached that rung. But I have!

I was 18 years old when I went to the seminary to begin to study to be a priest. Thus, 42 of my 60 years have been deeply involved in the life of the church. I grew up in a pre-Vatican II era when Mass was celebrated in Latin and I couldn't join the Cub Scouts because they met in the basement of the Maple Street Congregational Church! Times have changed in church and culture and my 60 year old life bears the imprint of those changes, including the blessings they have given and the toll they have taken on us all.

For these 60 years I am most grateful. I have enjoyed wonderful parish assignments and the opportunity, five years after ordination, to spend 4 years studying and working at the University of Notre Dame. A total of 13 years in campus ministry (at Notre Dame, Northeastern and Emerson College) were among the best and now the opportunity to minister to families and people whose existence is more settled than the transiency of college students has offered me the opportunity to pastor a community through its many joys and sorrows, changes, transitions and growth.

One of the things I'm doing at 60 is looking ahead to the rest of my life. Priests of the archdiocese are allowed to retire at 70 but an effort is made to encourage one to hang in there until 75, or beyond! Your pastor plans to retire at 12:01 a.m. on April 17, 2017 – God willing I live that long! Between now and then I am looking for ways to make these last 10 years of full time ministry as joyful, fruitful and productive as they can be. I have every desire and intention of staying in parish ministry – I'm not looking for that kind of change. But I have seen some older priests grow "stale" in their ministry and I want to work to make sure that doesn't happen in my own work. Your prayers for me in this regard would be much appreciated!

I count myself blessed to have been born in 1947 and to have grown up in and had the opportunity to minister in the church in times of restoration and renewal. These have not always been easy times, as you know, but they continue to be times of potential and growth. I look forward to serving you as Holy Family Parish becomes all that God calls us to be.

- Fr. Fleming