

March 13, 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

This past week, around 3:30 on Monday afternoon, we made a decision to cancel our Faith Festival for that evening and the one scheduled the following morning. At the time we canceled, it was snowing heavily and we had received a call from a staff person out on the road that the going was slippery. A weather report we'd heard forecast an evening unfavorable for travel. By the time 6:00 rolled around, after emails and website cancellation notices had gone out, the snow had stopped and the roads were bare! We were able to donate the food we'd planned to serve to a shelter for the homeless so that did not go to waste.

Given the parish schedule in the weeks ahead, we are unable to reschedule the Monday session but we will hold the Tuesday morning session this week on March 17, beginning at 9:30 a.m. with a continental breakfast.

It's not easy to plan. Monday would have been the third of four Festivals in this series and sessions one and two had not seen the numbers we'd expected given our registration figures. Those who did come gave positive feedback on the program we offered and I'm grateful for that. This round of Faith Festivals centered on *The Psalms: Hymnbook of the bible, Lyrics of our faith*. I was the presenter for an intergenerational gathering in Monument Hall. This time we dismissed only the youngest to age-appropriate instruction in the classrooms downstairs. I'm grateful to Julie Hirschler, Carol Messina, Jim Barkovic, Lauren Sprague and Jen Harney for being my musical co-presenters. I believe the experience was a combination of instruction on how and why we pray, how we use the psalms in our prayer, what the psalms teach us about prayer and, of course, actually singing and praying the psalms together. My hope is that those who attended will have a new and deeper appreciation of many of the psalms we sing at Mass and an understanding of them as prayer in light of both Jewish and Christian tradition.

In our January Faith Festivals the adult sessions were excellent. We had guest speakers addressing scriptural topics and the attentiveness, interest level and response of those in attendance (better attendance than the March series) was invigorating. Those who were there will remember my commenting at the end of the sessions on the obvious interest attendees had in these topics and the more than apparent desire to learn more. *WE WOULD LOVE TO PROVIDE THIS FOR YOU!* In fact, we believe this is one of the chief and most important tasks of our parish: to help our adult membership grown in faith and in *understanding* of faith.

While we want to provide such programming for all adults in the parish, there's a particular edge on this for parents of children still in school. Too often, parents believe that it's the responsibility of the parish to educate their children in the faith. That is only partly true. The primary responsibility for raising children in the faith belongs to parents and families - it's the work of the parish to assist in that effort - but not to relieve parents of their role in the faith formation of their sons and daughters. This is especially true in light of the actual experience of faith formation in the parish.

For instance... Our Holy Family census tells us that there are **752** students in **grades 1-10** registered in our parish. Of those **752** children, only **450** are registered in our religious education program. That means that **40%** of the children registered in Holy Family Parish are not registered for classes in Faith Formation. (Note that these figures do *not* include all the Concord families who name themselves as Catholic who have *not* registered in the parish, let alone in the religious education program.)

Add to these statistics the annual post-New Year's drop off in attendance for those who are registered in faith formation classes and you will see that we have a long way to go in working together to raise our children in the faith.

At the January Faith Festivals I pledged to write about the need to provide more opportunities for our adult population to grow in knowledge of their faith. As I said at that time, such an effort will mean that adults will need to commit to this even outside the time their children are downstairs in classrooms at a Faith Festival time.

Many of you who were at those January sessions are reading this letter now. I need your help. Our faith formation staff needs your help. Please be in touch with me or with Helen Cushman or Sandra Mueller so that we might begin to work out a program that answers your needs and in a format and schedule that accommodates your schedules. Our email addresses are:

FrAustinFleming@aol.com
Cushman1404@aol.com
Sandramhlyfm@aol.com

We want to hear from you, we need to hear from you and we hope to hear from you!

////////////////////////////////////

There are many anniversaries that each of us celebrates and an important one for me is the anniversary of my having been named a pastor for the first time. I was ordained in 1973 so this spring I will celebrate the 36th anniversary of that very important day. But there's a great difference between being a priest and being a priest who is also a pastor. Last week was the 15th anniversary of my being named a pastor, then of Our Lady Help of Christians Parish in West Concord. My life as a pastor finds me still in Concord now 3 years after what would have been my term at OLHC had the parishes not undergone the reconfiguration of 2004. I share this with you because it is a blessing to be your pastor and because your faith and your work for the gospel sustain my ministry in such large measure. *Deo Gratias!*

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming