

October 31, 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What are your impressions of Mass attendance at Holy Family Parish? Is it up? Is it down? Is it fairly stable? Well, this week I have some facts and figures that will help us get a statistical handle on Mass attendance in our parish.

Every year, every parish in the United States does a head-count at all its Sunday (and Saturday evening) Masses for three weekends in October. This gives each diocese and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops a common sampling of parish life in the US. We have statistics for Holy Family Parish for four years. (Remember that we were not founded as a parish until the last weekend of October in 2004.) As you study the numbers below it will be helpful to know that:

- Our church seats 528 people, yielding a total seating potential of 2,112 worshippers per weekend (and a seating potential of 6,336 worshippers over *three* weekends).
- These statistics were compiled each year on three October weekends, *excluding* the Columbus Day holiday weekend.
- The count is taken during the homily and includes the children in the chapel at the 9:30.

	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>
<b>Total</b> Mass attendance for <i>three</i> Oct wknds	3,909	4,104	3,663	3,421
<b>5:00</b> total attendance for <i>three</i> Oct wknds	750	809	880	835
<b>7:30</b> total attendance for <i>three</i> Oct wknds	655	660	447	431
<b>9:30</b> total attendance for <i>three</i> Oct wknds	1,371	1,476	1,326	1,227
<b>11:30</b> total attendance for <i>three</i> Oct wknds	1,133	1,159	1,010	928

As you can see, our high water mark was 2006. Comparing this year's attendance with '06 we see that for this annual three-week period:

- **total** attendance is down by 683 (17% decline)
- attendance at the **5:00** Mass is *up* by 26 (1% increase)
- attendance at the **7:30** is down by 229 (35% decline)
- attendance at the **9:30** is down by 249 (17% decline)
- attendance at the **11:30** is down by 231 (20% decline)

It's relatively easy to take the head-count but much more difficult to discern the reasons for this unhappy trajectory. In light of the hard data provided above, allow me to offer some observations

whose accuracy I cannot substantiate beyond their being the reflections of one of the few who see the whole worshipping community on almost all weekends (Sr. Rose Marie and, on some weekends, the cantors share that distinction with me!)

- Overall, the church in the United States (and in a particular way the church in the Archdiocese of Boston) continues to experience the impact of first, the scandal of sexual abuse by priests and bishops and second, the closing of local parishes. One cannot overestimate the devastating impact of these on Catholics and their relationship to the Church and its sacramental life.
- That our second year as Holy Family Parish saw an increase in worshippers might be the result of a “wait and see” approach by some who held back at the time of reconfiguration and then came aboard again upon hearing and seeing that Holy Family was a living community of faith.
- While I know that some members of our parishes of origin now worship in other Catholic parishes or have joined other churches, I also observe that there are many who, although they continue to join us for worship, do so less frequently than in the past. I often wonder if, as the result of the impact of the scandal and the closings, many Catholics give themselves a new-found or greater freedom in observing the obligation to worship on the Lord’s Day by attending Mass, more freely dispensing themselves from this duty than in the past.
- As you might guess, when pastors get together they often ask each other about attendance figures for weekend Mass. While I’ve not had an opportunity to speak with other pastors in terms of this year’s October count, I know that as recently as three weeks ago, at dinner with three other pastors, we all agreed that our eyeball estimation was that attendance was significantly off. In other words, I don’t believe that Holy Family Parish is unusual in the statistics reported here.
- Mass attendance figures for this archdiocese are comparable to the experience of dioceses around the country. The impact of the abuse crisis and the closing of parishes are realities in virtually every Catholic diocese. In many places in the US the specter of parish closings has only recently appeared. Background to those sad and shared experiences is a secularization of our culture which soaks in like a drenching rain, sometimes drowning the spirit of faith which was so much the heart of peoples’ lives in the not so distant past.
- Finally, although the numbers indicate a decline it’s very much worth noting that continually new families are joining our parish, that some of them are coming to us from other Catholic parishes in the area and that some are coming back to a relationship with the Catholic Church after having been away for some time and for a number of different reasons. It’s a pastor’s joy to know that: Catholic newcomers to Concord speak so well of the vitality of the faith community they find at Holy Family; that for some we are a kind of “magnet” parish, offering something important for their spiritual lives; and that those who have been away from the Church find in our parish a nourishing spiritual home to which to return.

I would be interested in knowing what your observations are. Have you noticed this decline? What do you think accounts for it? We’ve already begun discussing these statistics at our parish staff meetings and I’ll be looking for input from our Parish Council, our Finance Council, our Development Commission and our 2018 Group. Do *you* have observations or suggestions for helping the numbers to head in a more positive direction? If you send me your observations and

recommendations I'll share them in this space with the parish. While signed submissions always merit greater attention, anything I pass on here or at parish meetings will be without attribution.

There is, of course, one simple suggestion I can make without consultation with any one or any group: *Invite family members or friends to come to Mass...* I'm certainly not suggesting here that anyone *harangue* their families or neighbors about Sunday worship! That path is seldom productive. But if you find peace, a time for prayer, spiritual nourishment, consolation, challenge and hope through your participation at Mass, share that gently with others... if it seems the right moment - invite them to join you... offer a ride... be patient... and if at first you don't succeed: try (*and wait a while*), try (*and wait a while*), and try again...

Sincerely,  
Fr. Fleming