

November 6, 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We've begun our sixth year as Holy Family Parish. I was pleased with the manner in which we marked our 5th anniversary: letting the prayer, song and preaching at Mass on the anniversary weekend and our week of Faith Festivals be the occasions for our celebration.

Over the course of the weekend of October 24/25 a number of folks, including children, asked me, "Where are the sticks, Father?" For those of you who weren't with us on our first weekend as Holy Family in 2004, the "sticks" in question had to do with the first reading for our Masses that weekend, taken from Ezekiel 37:15 ff:

Thus the word of the LORD came to me:

Now, son of man, take a single stick, and write on it: *Judah* and those Israelites who are associated with him. Then take another stick and write on it: *Joseph* and all the house of Israel associated with him. Then join the two sticks together, so that they form one stick in your hand. When your countrymen ask you, "Will you not tell us what you mean by all this?" answer them: Thus says the Lord GOD: I will take the stick of Joseph and of the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I will join to it the stick of Judah, making them a single stick; they shall be one in my hand. The sticks on which you write you shall hold up before them to see. Tell them: Thus speaks the Lord GOD: I will take the Israelites from among the nations to which they have come, and gather them from all sides to bring them back to their land. I will make them one nation upon the land, in the mountains of Israel. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. My servant David shall be prince over them, and there shall be one shepherd for them all; they shall live by my statutes and carefully observe my decrees. I will make with them a covenant of peace; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will multiply them, and put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling shall be with them; I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

In my homily that weekend I had two sticks, about 5 feet in length, an inch in diameter, on which I wrote *St. Bernard Parish* and *Our Lady Help of Christians Parish* and then I bound them together with rope and placed them over the baptismal font in the middle of our sanctuary, the sign of that sacrament from which we all draw our Christian identity. The rest of the imagery and its significance on that weekend five years ago need little explanation. The sticks are still bound by those ropes and sit on top of a vestment case in the sacristy of the church.

When folks asked why I didn't bring them out I told them that the sticks no longer make a good image of who we are as a parish. The sticks have not become entwined with each other, they're not braided, they've not grafted one to the other - as we have in so many ways as a parish community.

I'm going to investigate ways in which we might soften those two sticks and ply them together to image more accurately the people we have become as Holy Family Parish, bringing with us the treasure of faith from our parishes of origin.

From my reading of church news in print and online I know that the kind of reconfiguration we experienced in the Archdiocese of Boston five years ago is taking place in dioceses all around the country. In fact, some parishes in our own archdiocese continue to struggle with the decisions made five years ago. While we've taken considerable steps to become one, new community of faith in Concord I recognize that there are varying levels of acceptance of what has happened.

Every year, every Roman Catholic parish in the United States takes an actual headcount of those attending Mass over three weekends. In an upcoming letter I'll write more about this count but in the context of considering our 5th anniversary as a parish, you might be interested in seeing the comparative **average weekend attendance** for the past five years, based on the October count:

2005	1,303
2006	1,368
2007	1, 221
2008	1,140
2009	1,135

Other pastors in the archdiocese are reporting a similar slow decline in attendance. Studies show that as recently as the 1970's, **72%** of Catholics in the archdiocese attended Mass regularly. Today that number stands at **17%**. Our own numbers reflect a similar decline although our percentage of regular attendees is about 13 points ahead of the average. (We estimate that our 1,300 *registered* households include about 3,900 individuals.) The questions facing the archdiocese face us as a parish as well: where have our people gone and how do we invite them home to worship and life with us?

There are no easy answers to such questions but the strength and vitality already ours as a parish give us a solid platform from which to continue to raise, address and, I pray, answer these difficulties in the years ahead of us.

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming