

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2011 HOMILY – STEWARDSHIP TALK

(Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-3; John 1: 29-34)

WE ALL BELONG TO GOD THROUGH CHRIST

This weekend I am giving my annual “State of the Parish” and Stewardship Talk at all the Masses. It has been an exciting seven and one half years for me as your pastor. Among my many memories is the generosity of so many folks at St. Paul’s – some who have been greatly blessed and some more modestly so. I will never forget about four years ago (when we first started the building fund drive) the boy who gave half his First Communion money to help build the new church. About a year later, a young girl of the parish also made a sacrifice from her savings to help the cause. Little by little, we have come to the point where the gifts and energy donated by so many have brought our new church to the brink of completion.

Throughout my life as a Catholic, I have witnessed other examples of generosity. My own parents never in my memory refused to give to a church cause. They gave time and money to help build Watterson High School and I don’t remember that they ever complained when only one of their four children ended up going there. When the flood of 1959 hit St. Charles where I was a sophomore at the time, I recall some alumni showing up at our home to request a donation to replace the science labs that were completely destroyed. My Dad gave the men cash on the spot. I will also never forget the example of Fr. Bob Schmidt, the pastor of my home parish of Immaculate Conception when I was ordained. When he retired, he did not take it easy. Instead he helped found a home for AIDS patients at a time when this was a much more dreaded disease than it is now.

Christians of every age group are called to give without measure because God gave himself to us completely in Christ. In today’s Gospel from St. John, we see John the Baptist giving witness to Jesus in a very humble way. The Baptist himself was popular and some even thought he was the Messiah. But today he points out Jesus as the “Lamb of God” ... who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.” John then recalls his Baptism of Jesus (which we celebrated last Sunday) where the Holy Spirit pointed out Jesus as the Son of God. From the first moment of his existence in his mother’s womb, John the Baptist belonged to God as his humble servant. Jesus in his turn also lowered himself to become a human being because the Father willed that he do so in order to serve us, his brothers and sisters, totally. Thus Jesus gave his all on the cross and so made it possible for us to follow his example of compassionate generosity. As the first reading from Isaiah points out, Christ follows in the tradition of his Israelite ancestors and became a light to the nations and he invites us to be a light to one another. Jesus showed his humble obedience above all when he refused to come down from the cross and so followed through with his total donation of self. In doing this he gives us the courage to offer all we have to God, knowing that the Father will ultimately raise us to new life as he did his beloved Son.

In giving my annual report on your offering of yourselves to our parish, I have the chance to say thank you for your generosity and to share some highlights from the year we just finished. If you ask...Who is St. Paul Parish? I would say...we are a parish who imitates Christ's life

through worship, education, community, hospitality, outreach, service, and evangelization in the tradition of St. Paul. Actually, these are the words that describe our purpose or mission as a parish. I can say in confidence that in 2010 we did live up to our parish mission.

Here is a quick review of just some of what took place this past year:

At the end of 2010 our membership totals were:

-4,400 households

- about 14,000 individuals

-and in 2010 we celebrated nearly 1,000 Masses

-191 Baptisms

-27 Marriages

-50 Funerals (70 in 2009, by the way)

-236 First communions and 198 Confirmations

- 44 RCIA candidates became Catholic at the Easter Vigil

-376 new families joined the parish

-Over 70 Parish Ministries and Programs met on a regular basis with thousands of hours given in time and talent by hundreds of parish volunteers. Thanks to all those volunteers.

-850 Children were enrolled in our day school

-916 Children participated in our Parish School of Religion

-nearly 400 parishioners were involved in a Small Church Community

-Our youth gave countless hours in service to parish ministries and to help the needy, including the annual trip to Cranks Creek Kentucky to serve the poorest of the poor.

-hundreds participated in our Fall Parish Mission

-445 Turkeys were collected at Thanksgiving for our sister parish Holy Rosary/St. John

-Over 1,600 tags were taken off the Jesse trees for Holy Rosary/St John at Christmas which resulted in thousands of dollars in gift cards, checks, clothing items, toiletries and toys.

-more than 33,000 Sandwiches were made for St Lawrence Haven

-Countless gifts and hours were donated to Birthright, Forty Days for Life, and other pro-life groups

-\$63,000 collected for WARM

-\$54,000 collected for St Vincent de Paul

-\$50,000 for Haiti in two collections

-Over \$2.1million dollars were given to the weekly offertory

-And by the way (as I said) in 2010 we also started building our new church

I thank you for the many ways you shared your blessings with St. Paul Parish in the year of grace just ended.

When a new year begins, we all seem filled with a sense of hope. Certainly, the economy is still a factor. Many people are still hurting and I pray daily for all who are. As 2011 starts, I look forward with a renewed confidence to see improvements in our economy and fewer people hurting; and I also look forward to our community's continuing spiritual journey and watching it progress in this New Year. With a particular excitement, I look forward to our new church being completed and our having one place to worship at last.

In keeping with the spirit of stewardship, I ask that you in 2011 continue to follow Jesus' example of self-giving. As we move into the future in a new church, the weekly offertory collection will become even more the measure of St. Paul's financial health. I thank all who have been so conscientious about the collection basket. And I ask that everyone take the offertory seriously. This year, I am asking you to focus your attention to consider electronic deduction as a way to help the parish. At the present time, about 400 households use Electronic Funds Transfer to contribute to the offertory collection. If we could increase the number taking advantage of this simple and easy method of giving, it would be a big boost to our parish. Please note that the EFT form is on the parish website and you can download it, fill it out and return it through the collection basket. For those who have no access to the internet, copies of the form are available in the activities center breezeway and church lobby and will continue to be there for some weeks. This is a yellow form near the stained glass window display. I respectfully ask everyone to consider EFT because I believe this is the path to a more successful St. Paul community.

At the same time, we continue our fund drive for the new church which we plan to dedicate on June 29 of this year. I am grateful beyond words for all your support of the fund drive while also being faithful to the parish offertory. At this time in our parish history, supporting both the offertory and the building fund is a necessary step for our parish and its future. The Building Campaign has reached a remarkable total of \$12.7 million pledged to date of our \$13.5 million goal. At this time, the priorities of the campaign are twofold: first, to reach the final goal which means we still need to raise about \$800,000 in additional pledges to achieve the \$13.5 million dollar level that Bishop Campbell has asked us to attain; and second, it is important for all who have pledged to complete their pledges in a timely manner. This is a critical year as the church construction is completed. Not only do we need more parishioners to step forward by making a new or increased pledge, we also need to collect as much as possible of our remaining pledge payments from existing donors so we can reduce our debt and lower the final amount we will need to borrow from the diocese.

I would like to close with a little story that I first heard from the sisters in my Catholic grade school. A man in those days came upon a boy selling post cards for ten cents each. "And what are you going to do with the money?" the kind gentleman asked. The kid replied in a serious tone: "I am raising a million dollars to feed the starving in poor countries." The guy laughed. "A million dollars?" he cried. "Do you expect to raise it all by yourself?" "No sir," the boy said sincerely, "there's another little boy helping me."

The spirit of this young man is the spirit of generous Christians throughout history. It is the spirit of child-like trust in the power of cooperation and working together. It is the spirit of our parish. My fellow parishioners, our humble faith has brought our community to an historic crossroads. Together we will fulfill the future God has in mind for our great parish of St. Paul.

Thank you for all you have done in the past and all you will do in 2011.