

2007 Pastoral Report

This weekend our parish leadership gives you a report of the state of our parish this year. I offer a report of the pastoral life of the parish and Bob Loiseau gives the financial report on behalf of the Finance Committee.

Our parish continues to grow in so many ways. New members continue to join our parish, many drawn by what they have heard from others about the faith, life and vitality of our parish and our worship and ministries. That is always so heartening. Many times we who are part of Sacred Heart get used to our parish life and can even take it for granted, but these new households who are attracted to join remind us of the blessings we have. This year 137 new households have joined our parish bringing our total census to 2189 households. This year we initiated a new ministry called “New Beginnings” to serve as means to help new members feel at home here and make a good enduring connection with our parish. Current studies point to the importance of people who move into a town making a good and immediate connection with the parish. They say that if they do not do that within the first six months then they tend not to join at all.

In 2007 we initiated 40 children and one adult through Baptism into our Catholic faith and we received 5 adults as members of the Catholic Church through their profession of faith. We witnessed the marriage of 9 couples and celebrated the funeral liturgies of 48 parishioners. Our ministries to the sick, the homebound, those in health care facilities in Southbury as well as at Southbury Training School and the poor especially Chapman House and Rainbow House, both safe houses for abused and neglected children in

Waterbury touched the lives of many people with the assurance of God's love and compassion through our own.

One of the blessings of this year was the addition of Sr. Pat Torre DW as pastoral associate. As many of you who have met her know, Sr. Pat is bringing a great faith, warmth and pastoral expertise to our parish staff. I deeply appreciate sharing the pastoral ministry of the parish with her and from what so many of you say you agree with that. Her Call to Worship at the beginning of Mass sets a wonderful tone and helps to focus our prayer. Her work with the sick and with the ministers who serve them reflects great compassion. She is coordinating the important ministry to families requesting Baptism for their child welcoming them to the parish and to the important role of Christian parents. Sr. Pat will be serving on many other fronts and our parish will continue to benefit from her ministry here.

Our GIFT program began its second full year and all of us are growing in our understanding and appreciation of this refreshing way of growing in faith together. Approximately 1500 parishioners regularly take part in GIFT. How true it is that as we actually take part in this unique process all of us, staff and parishioners, young and old come to understand it better. I am struck by many of your comments and insights about this effort. Adults are coming to feel more confident about their faith. Men in particular are enjoying being part of their children's faith formation, a role that had been largely that of mothers. Our young people are showing a deeper awareness of the Scriptures, the person of Jesus and the life of the Church especially if they take part in the Children's Liturgy of the Word and have some active practice of their faith with their families in their homes. The connection of

the GIFT sessions, the weekly gathering here for Mass and some simple attention to faith in their homes through the use of our home packet is creating an atmosphere in which God, Jesus and faith are becoming more real for all of us but especially our youngsters. All of us, staff and participants, struggle to some degree with the intensity of the effort and amount of work it requires and with how different it is from what we have done before. I ask you to try to remain open to GIFT. Some of you may have concerns about it or you may be wary of it without really trying it. I ask as I always do that you come to talk with any of us on staff. Such conversations, when done with respect and civility, contribute to all of us growing in faith together.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the extraordinary vision, expertise and dedication that Anne Sharkey brings to this effort as the director of the program. National leaders in whole community catechesis have been regularly referring parishes who want to find out about this approach to faith formation to us. Many have come to experience our program and others have asked for our help and insights about it. This acknowledgement of our program is due in great part to Anne's leadership and the parish owes her our sincere gratitude. Ami Conlan, the administrative assistant in Faith Formation, and so many volunteers also offer great service and untold hours of effort to help build a faith formation program that I believe is second to none.

This Thursday as you know ten of us will travel to Haiti to continue our immersion in the life of the Haitian people, a truly third world experience, and to consider the possibility of adopting a parish there. We are presently

seeking information which we will bring back to you for consideration by our Pastoral Council and Finance Council. It is looking like the parish our parishioners visited last spring will not be a good match for us at this time and so we will be visiting two other parishes this time. It is an exciting dimension of our parish life and we rely on your prayer with us over the next weeks as we visit there. Should our parish in fact adopt a Haitian parish we look forward to many and varied connections parish to parish, family to family, person to person to grow from that experience.

It has been a very good year for our parish, but several challenges are clearly ours. Of particular concern is the need for meaningful outreach to those parish members who for one reason or another no longer share the celebration of Eucharist and our parish life with us. After Easter Sr. Pat will lead a process for those who are alienated from the Catholic Church or Sacred Heart Parish. We hope that this will offer an opportunity for people to know that we miss their presence and want to share our faith and community with them. Another concern however are those who have no particular reason for no longer practicing but simply get out of the habit or simply drift away. When asked why they no longer participate and practice their Catholic faith they are hard-pressed to have an answer. I am not sure that they would come to the program we will offer. In some sense they do not find a need for God and/or membership in a faith community. I trust that you know people among your family members, neighbors and friends who fall into this group. As always Sr. Pat and I and any of our parish staff are ready and willing to speak with them, not to convince them to return but to help them become more clearly aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it. They are not here to hear this invitation so I urge you to

personally invite them to either the upcoming program or to a confidential pastoral conversation with one of us. A healthy and mature faith in God is important as we each discover over and over again in life. It directs and focuses our lives in the midst of so many varied and conflicting experiences and pressures. Being part of the prayer, especially the Eucharist, and life of a faith community nourishes faith like nothing else can. Jesus purposefully used the imperative tense of the verb on the night before he died: “Do this in memory of Me.” And “Love one another as I have loved you.”. He did so not to place another law or obligation upon people. He criticized over and over in the Gospels those who multiplied laws for others. Rather he did it because it was a specific way, his recommended way for his disciples to keep their faith both alive and helpful in human living. And his disciples have tried to follow his commands since then. We want to be sure that all Southbury Catholics find that same assurance and nourishment here. Indeed it is an essential part of our mission as our parish mission statement notes.

Let me conclude with a word of great and heartfelt gratitude to you for who you are, for the quality of faith you bring and for all you do to keep Sacred Heart Parish vibrant and effective. You are the Church of the Sacred Heart! Your faith, prayer, commitment to your parish and its mission not just for your own salvation but for that of others and your personal daily efforts to be faithful to Jesus Christ are what being “church” is all about. There would be no Catholic Christian faith community in Southbury without you.

May God continue to bless all of us with true wisdom and peace!

Father Joe