

From the Pastor's Desk

I want to begin my reflection this week by urging all members of our parish family to please remember Pope Francis in your daily prayers while he continues to recover from double pneumonia. At the time of this writing (Thursday evening), the Vatican Press Office bulletin suggested that the pope is making gradual progress as he enters his seventh day of treatment. Papal advisers have advised against alarmism. Vatican sources note that the pope has no sign of a fever, that he continues to breathe on his own and that his heart is very healthy, but also acknowledge a lengthy hospitalization is likely. As you know, I am especially devoted to Pope Francis. I believe that he has been a stellar pontiff and that his practical theological approach to ecclesiology (that is all things that have to do with the Church) has allowed the Church not only to survive but to thrive during a tumultuous period of history in the world and in the Church. His all-inclusive love ranging from creation to the most marginalized members of society has been inspirational to me in my priesthood and has been a source of hope to all the world. On his behalf, I want to thank you for placing him before our Lord Jesus Christ, the Divine Healer, in your daily prayers.

As you will have noted in the main section of the bulletin, I have some concern regarding the downward trend in attendance at weekend Masses. Some of the lower turnouts have been a result of the inclemency of the weather (which is debatable to a degree); however, poor meteorological conditions are not the only reasons for the decline. I know that our attendance at Sunday Eucharist never resumed to its former status after COVID, and again I am not certain about the reason for the decision of some individuals not to return. For one, the US bishops, in accord with official Catholic teaching, made it decidedly clear that the **OBLIGATION** to come to celebrate Sunday Mass with the community was restored. While watching Mass on TV or live streaming it on the internet is an option for those who are sick or otherwise seriously impeded from coming to Mass; however, this practice is not a matter of preference that is equal to coming to Mass on Sunday. As I said, I want ALL OF US to reach out to those who have not returned for any reason (without judgment) to return to join the Sunday assembly to praise and thank God for all that He is and all that HE has done for us. I am going to reach out to all our parishioners by way of letter next week; however, I would like all of you, if you know anyone who may just need some encouragement, to please invite them to return personally. As I said in the main body of the bulletin, the future of our parish depends upon it. Please know that I am also investigating alternative means of increasing our parish membership.

Please continue to pray that we continue to remain stable and grow as a strong symbol of the Catholic Faith in the 8th Ward community of Johnstown.

I would also like to take this opportunity to ask the parish family to pray for two special intentions of mine, both regarding my present and future ministry. With that in mind, I would also like to take this opportunity to announce that I have been given a new ministry assignment from our bishop. Effective immediately, I have been named the Director for the Ongoing Formation of Clergy and Clergy Services for the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. Some of you may recall that years ago, I held the position of Director of Ongoing Formation; however, the present assignment is a bit more involved. In this position, I serve as something of a special liaison between the Bishop and the Clergy and in that role, I have a special responsibility for the care of the intellectual, personal, spiritual, social, and health care needs of our diocesan priests. The goal of this position is to build up the presbyterate (i.e., the body of priests within the diocese) into a healthy and contented group of men so that we all function to better serve the needs of the Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. My placement in this position shows great faith in me on the part of the bishop. I am happy to take on this ministry, for I see it as something of a vocation within a vocation. I have always wanted to do more to build up the fraternity that exists with my brother priests, and this ministry is giving me the opportunity to do so. Please remember me in this role as one of the two special intentions that I have regarding my priestly ministry.

PARISH MARDI GRAS PARTY: *The parish is tentatively planning a Mardi Gras Party for Saturday, March 1, 2025 at 5:00 PM (immediately following the 4:00 PM Mass. The parish will be providing chicken, jambalaya, red beans and Rice and pasta and we are asking attendees to bring other side dishes or deserts of their choice (if you are able). There will be decorations, music, and fun for the entire family to enjoy so please consider joining us for this annual parish event. As I have always said, community building is an integral part of contemporary Catholic life and what better opportunity to do in than in the presence of delicious free food!! Please indicate your intentions by signing up in vestibule of the Church or by calling the parish secretary on or before Wednesday, February 26th. Please know that we need 50 people or more to sign up in order to hold this event. PLEASE CONSIDER COMING OUT TO JOIN US!!*



CHILD AND YOUTH PROTECTION CLEARANCES

*In order to remain compliant with the Child and Youth Policy of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown and with the mandates of PA state law, **all Visitation parish volunteers and liturgical ministers are required to obtain, renew, or update their child and youth protection clearances at this time.** This process is universal, that is, it is required in all parishes throughout the diocese. A checklist of clearances and other materials that are required (complete with explanations and directions) will be published in next week's bulletin and any materials that are not available by means of the internet will be made available by the parish. If you require any assistance completing any of the required forms, Catherine Bennett, the parish secretary, who will be spearheading the compliance effort, will be available and more than willing to help you. Again, I cannot underscore the importance of compliance on the part of all of our volunteers and liturgical ministers. Failure to do so can result in punitive measures being taken against our parish on the part of the state and federal government. Most importantly, it is important that we assure protection for the most vulnerable members of any community, our children. Please note that obtaining these clearances is of NO COST to any volunteer or liturgical minister. We look forward to your cooperation in maintaining our status as a compliant parish. Thank you as always for your willingness to serve our parish. We would not survive without you.*

LENTEN SPIRITUAL PROGRAMMING

Prayer Partners - Once again this Lent, we will be matching individuals as prayer partners. Next Sunday, slips will be available in the main vestibule of the church for you to submit your name to be matched with a prayer partner for the Lenten Season. You will be provided with the name of your prayer partner after Mass on either Ash Wednesday or the First Sunday of Lent.

Eucharistic Adoration - As is the case throughout the year, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament will occur following the Wednesday, 5:30 Mass (1/2 hour) and the Friday 12:05 Mass (1 hour). Please consider spending some private time with the Lord in the exposed Blessed Sacrament during Lent.

Prayer Groups - There will be two prayer groups this Lenten Season. The first will be one evening during the week (TBD) facilitated by our diaconal candidate, John Fontana, the other on Fridays following Adoration, facilitated by Fr. John. Both will deal with the Jubilee Year theme of "hope" as it unfolds in the scriptures and in our lives. Please join us for one or both of these prayer groups.

**More information will follow in next week's bulletin.*

PARISH MEETING SCHEDULES (tentative – due to weather)

Parish Pastoral Council: Monday, March 3rd – 6:00 PM - Elizabethan Suite

Combine Councils: Monday, March 10th – 6:00 PM - Elizabethan Suite