

Bulletin Summary of January 30th, 2022

St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish

Forward Together with Dignity, Grace, & Hope

This weekend I wish to speak to members of our St. Ignatius of Loyola parish family in a real and most important way. If ever there were a pastor's column to read carefully- this would be it.

I love our parish. I love our people. I love the profound sense of reverence that can be found at all our masses and in all our churches. I love the quiet stillness of the 7am Mass, the attentiveness of the 4pm, and the lively wiggles of the little ones who fill the 9am Mass.

I love walking in Holy Trinity Church in the mid-afternoon when the sun makes the windows gleam like a great cathedral. I love how every seat at St. Martin seems close to the altar and how despite its larger size you don't notice it. I love the small church feel of our sister parish, St. Mary in Rollinsford. I love how during the first year and a half of the pandemic (for the record I do not love pandemics and can't wait for all this to be over!) when we went to one campus (St. Martin) due to its larger size and livestream capabilities- not one person complained, and instead **we all went forward with dignity, grace, and hope**. That is not something that could happen anywhere, and it is something that is a testament to our people and the love of God we share. It is also a reflection of our common-sense approach to all things, in an age where sense is neither common, nor often seen.

This past week I had the occasion to visit with two cancer patients from the parish. One of whom was bedridden at home, and the other hospitalized after a sudden and most unexpected and serious diagnosis. During my visit to offer the Anointing of the Sick, both began to ask me questions, and offer commentary, on Sunday's presentation about the future of our parish. Both, despite their incredible sickness and the most difficult conditions, were deeply invested in what we do here, and wanted to be part of the family meeting. The images of these holy women lying in their beds with smart phones at their sides worrying about our future when it would have been easy and understandable to be worried about their own is remarkable. One of the women shared with me how after she found out things were not looking great for her, how she and her husband held hands and watched the presentation from her hospital room.

What struck me most about my recent visits with our parishioners fighting cancer was not only their faithfulness and love for this community, but also their commitment to looking beyond the present moment to a future built on hope. I suspect each parishioner was scared by the uncertainty of their own situation and yet they responded with dignity and grace. We should always do the same.

The importance of what we do, and what we share as a parish family, can never be reduced to a calculation on a piece of paper, a spreadsheet on a computer, or even a carefully worded bulletin column. Our faith, our churches, our people and the family life we share are so much more than that, and more than what can ever be captured here. It is for this reason that throughout the past fourteen months as we have been discerning how we go forward as a parish family, and where and how we focus our resources, we were always and will continue to be fully transparent and

forthright, and will do everything with dignity and grace. Not only do our people demand and deserve it, so do our churches and properties that have served us so well over the years.

Over the past fourteen months members of the St. Ignatius Parish Council, the Finance Council, and the Long-Term Planning Committee have been asking the Lord to lead them along the way to study, reflect, and **discern how best to go forward as a parish community**. Together with all of us in the parish they have been praying, discerning, and studying our past, present, and future, all the while being **fully transparent and seeking feedback, recommendations, and input all along the way**.

The Councils and Committee **began by studying our parish history** so as best to understand the **very foundation** of faith on which we are built, and the people who entrusted it to us. After a study of our history the focus transitioned to **understanding the present**, to a deep look at what makes our parish special, a look at everything from parish fairs and picnics to our spiritual programming, sacramental preparation, and worship. After looking at the present we turned our **focus to the future** and we looked at the **needs** that are not being met, the **opportunities for growth** in the parish, and the ways in which we should **anticipate and prepare** for the ever-changing world in which we live.

At the heart of the discernment process was a fundamental awareness that churches aren't factories which are all about efficiency- they are **places of encounter with God**. Churches are the places we not only baptize children, receive the sacraments, enter into marriages, and lay to rest our loved ones---- churches are familiar friends who walk with us in the joys and sufferings of life. Throughout the entire discernment process this reality was not only always front and center it was important to everyone involved--- a fact that was reflected in the tears streaming down the faces of many Council and Committee members as they made their recommendation at the final meeting by secret ballot. The councils and committee came to unanimous agreement, knowing what was being recommended was not only the right and responsible thing to do, and what God was calling us to do, but with heavy heart. I suspect any parishioner who has the sold "the family home" to downsize knows of what I speak. One can weep even as one goes forward in faith, hope, and confidence.

In the Summer of 2021, the recommendation was made to the parish, by the Councils and Committee that St. Ignatius of Loyola consolidate onto one Campus. This recommendation was formulated after the study of our history, the present, and visioning for the future. The recommendation was made first and foremost from a pastoral view- and recognition that we are stronger when we are together, focused, and in one place. Following the Whole Parish Presentation on June 27th, making the recommendation of going to one campus model in Somersworth, parish wide input was sought. Feedback was received from hundreds of parishioners, **97% of whom recommended that we go forward with consolidation into a one campus model**.

Receiving this direction from the parish the Councils and Committee continued their work and did a deep dive into things and studied every aspect of our current campuses and the protentional for each. Every aspect of our current churches and buildings were studied. Every possibility for

the future was explored- including expansion and improvements to each church. In particular the following factors were explored:

- Seating Capacity
- Square Footage
- Parking
- Faith Formation Classes
- Outdoor Worship + Fellowship space
- Location
- Access/Egress
- Visibility
- Potential for Expansion + Further Development/Additions/Etc...
- Value
- Worship space

In the end, in exploring these factors clear advantages emerged to the St. Martin Campus. The first and most obvious was the added seating capacity of the Church. Although St. Martin can feel small, its seating capacity is in fact approximately 1/3 larger. This added space is reflected both in the Church itself and in the parish hall and religious education areas. One of the areas given serious consideration relative to space is how the possibility of expansion could affect such a calculation. After all, things need not be presumed to remain always the same. Consulting with architects a surprising reality emerged, one that makes perfect sense but was one of those things one never thinks of- expanding Holy Trinity Church was deemed unfeasible.

Due to the support beams of the roof and the sight lines of the Church – relatively speaking it would be impractical to make the Church wider, especially considering the layout of the sanctuary. The added seats to the left or right would not only be under a low ceiling, they also could not see the front of the church except for the very back rows. The only way you could feasibly expand Holy Trinity would be to extend toward High Street which would be severely limited due to setback requirements.

The Council and committees of course looked at such things as parking, and the ability to have activities inside and outside the Church. In doing so it was largely felt that either campus could reasonably accommodate such needs. One surprising thing for many people was the fact that St. Martin Church has more land than Holy Trinity, albeit much of it currently covered by the trees on the Mt. Calvary side of the campus. Looking at the potential for expansion St. Martin again emerged as the more advantageous property.

Looking at Location several things emerged. First it was clear that Holy Trinity has a much more visible location. This is indisputable. However, what also emerged was how the ease of entering and leaving the Holy Trinity property has become unbearably difficult as traffic has increased in the last decade. The visibility of Holy Trinity came at the cost of easy access and egress, which were of serious concern particularly for older drivers and during busy times, after Mass, during the day and early evening, etc.... The relative quiet of St. Martin campus and the neighborhood feel was seen as positive, as well as the proximity to the high school and middle school.

The physical spaces and worship areas of both Churches were studied and both have clearly serviced our community well. Many expressed a preference for the more traditional style of Holy Trinity Church, but felt that St. Martin was beautiful in its own way. An emphasis on enhancing the beauty of our churches was clear, and felt to be possible with each campus, and important in going forward.

Finally, there was a look at the resources that would be needed to make the necessary improvements at each campus (including installation of handicap bathrooms, upgrading lighting, electrical, enhancements to worship space, gathering space, etc....) and recognition that what is needed will be much more expensive than we might expect (the cost of groceries factor- it has gone through the roof!). Professional real estate appraisers looked at both properties and determined the resale value of Holy Trinity would be twice that of St. Martin Church. Although the resale value was discussed, it did not become a determining factor. I can confidently say that had the resale valuation been the same for both properties, the recommendation would remain the same.

The totality of the facts considered weighed by the committee were weighed together with the feedback that came out of the second listening session on November 31st. At the second Parish Family Meeting all of the gathered facts from year long study were shared without prejudice or suggestion as to which campus they would favor. The review of the facts was left first to the parishioners who were given the opportunity to share feedback. Hundreds of parishioners did and their view mirrored what the Councils & Committee's final recommendation would be, that being the consolidation of campuses onto the 120 Maple Street property (St. Martin). Parish feedback showed 98% support for the work of the Councils/Committee and for the direction they were headed in. Only 2% of respondents favored consolidation onto the 404 High Street (Holy Trinity) campus or the repurposing of the buildings within the parish in any real way.

The Parish Council, Finance Council, and Long-Range Planning Committee unanimously recommended consolidation onto the St. Martin Campus which will become not the St. Martin Campus, but rather the ***SAINTE IGNATIUS CAMPUS!*** Emphatic in both the recommendation made by the councils and the committee, and the feedback from the parish, as well as the insistence of Fr. Andrew- is that as we go forward that we proceed with dignity and grace. The consolidation of campuses will not be easy, and in many ways our work has just begun, but at the forefront must not only be continued transparency, openness, and opportunities for engagement from all parishioners, but also a very calculated effort to be sure that we do not abandon the church to fall apart before our eyes, but rather proceed with dignity and grace always.

Ultimately, the recommendation to consolidate campuses, and eventually to close a Church is not a decision that lay in the parish, but rather one that is in the hands of the bishop alone. Having arrived at a consensus we will now be writing to the bishop asking permission to go forward and alerting him of our plan.

What happens now?

#1. We write to the bishop and share what we have been doing and the recommendation we have arrived at and seek his approval to go forward.

#2. Begin making repairs and deferred maintenance upgrades that we have been holding off until we had a better sense of our future plans. These include any repairs that might be better to do while we have two churches in Somersworth, rather than one (lighting and electrical upgrades, flooring, etc...)

#3. Pray, Discern, and Listen- After steps one and two we will be looking at how best to go forward with moving to one campus. We will be working with professional architects to solicit plans on how to add offices, as well as things like handicap bathrooms, a proper entry way and gathering space, how to make improvements to worship space, and facilitate ease of exit from the parish hall, and how to make it easier to enter the Church from the back parking lot, and how to incorporate a Eucharistic Adoration chapel into our future plans. All of these things will take time and careful planning.

One area that will be most important will be how to incorporate elements of Holy Trinity Church into our future improvements, after all not only will it be home for everyone, it needs to feel like home to everybody too! **It will be our St. Ignatius Home!**

I wish to thank the Parish Council, the Finance Council, the Long-Term Planning Committee and the entire parish for the dignity and grace with which you have shown in this process. What we have done and what we have yet to do has not and will not be easy, but it will be the right thing to do to strengthen our community in the present and for generations to come. When a unanimous recommendation was reached earlier this week I wept- just as I did the day, we left our family home in Vermont and moved to NH many years ago. At that time, as in this time, I wept knowing it was God's will and for the best, and the right thing to do- but it was still hard and still is hard.

As we move forward, we must do so TOGETHER with Dignity and Grace. God has unified us in this most difficult discernment, and he will bless us not only for our sacrifice but also for our vision- to build up this community and set in place all we need to serve the generations that will follow long after all of us our reading this bulletin are gone.

~Father Andrew