

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners,

This Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of a new liturgical year. As you know, the Church has her own calendar for celebrating the story of our salvation in Christ Jesus Our Lord. The Church year begins with the four weeks of Advent in which we remember how the People of God awaited and were prepared for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This is also our time to prepare ourselves spiritually for the celebration of Christmas. So along with all the other preparations you are making, I encourage you as individuals and families to remember to take time to pray each day so that you will experience the true joy of Christmas, the joy of knowing that the Lord is indeed with us.

Beginning in January we will have a second collection on the first Sunday of each month specifically for the support of our school. After deducting the mandatory assessment for the Archdiocese, half of the school collection will go toward tuition assistance. We hope that if we can assist needy families with part of the tuition cost we will be able to enroll more children of the parish in our school. The other half of the school collection will be used to help with the operating costs and capital improvements for the school. Currently, there is almost no money in the budget for improvements for the school.

Now some of you may be asking: "Why are we doing this?" The answer is quite simple. *Supporting our school is what the people of St. Mary's - Bryantown have done for almost a hundred years.* Indeed, parishioners here, including many of you who are reading this, at one time supported three schools.

For the first fifty years or so, the parish could rely almost completely on the sacrifices of the School Sisters of Notre Dame to keep the school going. The Sisters received little compensation and it was easy to keep tuition low. Because of the sacrifices the Sisters made, even parish families with very little money could send their children to school here. Things are different now of course. The Sisters are gone and our school is staffed by lay people. Being lay people, they have spouses and children and they both need and deserve a living wage. So we have to charge a tuition that can help us meet the cost of salaries. At the same time, we are trying to keep our tuition from becoming so high that only rich people could afford to send their children to our school. Since 80% of our school costs are for salaries, the difference between what we can charge for tuition and what we need in fairness to pay our teachers is what creates our deficit. Now if our school had a full enrollment, say around 265 students, there would be no deficit as the additional tuition would take care of it. However, we only have 232 students and are therefore running in the red. If you saw the *Catholic Standard* last week you will know that there are several other schools in the Archdiocese that are facing the challenge of under enrollment. I believe that as the population of Charles County continues to grow, we will get more students. But at present our school is under enrolled.

Some of you who do not have children in our school may be thinking: "What does any of this have to do with me and my family?" Well, I ask you to consider this; if you ever attended a Catholic school yourself, or a CCD program, or, if you are a convert and went through the RCIA program, then many other Catholics helped to pay for your education. Our schools and faith education programs have never been able to pay for themselves. Our children have always needed the support of other Catholics besides their parents in order to be taught the Faith. So even if we don't all have a child in our school, the success of our school is all of our business. We owe it to all those people who sacrificed, both the Sisters and the parish families, so that we were able to be taught our Faith.

Still, some of you may be saying "But why the school? Why can't the kids just go to public school and come to CCD?" In response to these types of questions let me say this first of all. There are no volunteers in our

parish who are more important or deserve more gratitude than the people who teach in our religious education program. They make a great sacrifice of time and energy to teach the Faith to other people's children. This is true generosity and I don't know what we would do without them. However, this being said, there is simply no way that our religious education program can do in 90 minutes a week what our school does in 30 hours a week.

For example, in our school each day begins and ends with prayer and religion is taught every day. Our Catholic identity is evident in every part of our school with crucifixes and pictures of Jesus Christ and the saints prominently displayed. We have a Mass with the school children on the First Friday of the month and on Holy Days of Obligation. The children in our school are able to attend presentations on religious vocations and the importance of supporting the sanctity of all human life. In our school we teach our children traditional Catholic devotions like the candle lighting in Advent, the Stations of the Cross in Lent and the crowning of the Blessed Mother in May. In our school we teach our children that there is nothing more important in their lives than their relationship with the Lord. We try to do as many of these things as possible in our religious education program but there just isn't enough time. We will never be able to do in 90 minutes what we can in 30 hours.

This is why, in an ideal world, every Catholic child would be able to attend a Catholic school. We don't live in an ideal world of course. But we shouldn't quit trying to do all we can to provide a Catholic education for as many of our parish children as possible. Catholic schools help form good Catholics and foster vocations. Catholic schools also help our children attain academic success and to become good citizens. This is why even many non-Catholic families want their children in Catholic schools.

For all these reasons I'm hoping all parishioners will follow the lead of our Parish Council and support our school through the school collection. I know times are tough for many. All I ask is that you think and pray about it and are as generous as all those people you never knew who helped pay for your Catholic education. Certainly, at this time in the history of our parish there is no second collection that is more important than the one we will begin taking up for our school.

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley