

STATE OF THE PARISH REPORT

2005

With the 2004 administrator transition, a parish report was required. This State of the Parish Report is optional. I plan to write one annually. The use of this report I see as cause for theological reflection on the parish life. This report will need to be read by all in leadership—faculty, staff, committees, boards, ministers, the assembly, etc. From that place of prayer and thought, any seed of this text will take root for the growth of the Body of Christ at SVFP. The more trying or negative the times we live in become, the greater the call to a faith response.

Previous Writings and References

This report will have many references with two appendices: the administrator report of 2004 and letters from the pastor's desk, which appeared in the weekly bulletin. These both show an ongoing consistency of direction. The state of the parish report will address the spiritual, financial, social and catechetical levels of Christian development at SVFP. My bulletin letters will be used as references.

First the MACROcosim—the big picture: *Where are we in history?*

There has been a collapse of culture and therefore a collapse of family life. Peers, media and culture raise children today, with parents being just a small piece of their life. For many generations now we have been shaped more by culture than by faith. Our culture of today is based on disrespect, debasement, and...or should I just say “jerryspringerizing” of life itself. Being energized by criticism is often part of our consumer culture. Silence becomes affirmation, while profound criticism and blaming are the *modus operandi*. Nothing is sacred. Even before the “9/11” terrorism, our world was experiencing terror. Many writers would say we are in a post-Christian era. Many of us have witnessed personally the “God is dead” movement of the 1960's right into our own family life. (Keep in mind that the religion problems of this era are not limited to Catholicism.)

In the Administrator Report I referred to *The Shattered Lantern* by Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I.—at least the first 60 pages. Again this report does the same because what he does is addresses the God-is-dead movement, now over a hundred years old, which gives us the death culture within which we are saturated. God is the lantern—the light gone out of our lives. Shattered. Smashed By us! God is—was—the structure of our existence. What Rolheiser does in this book is to show us the symptoms of life when God is gone; when God is dead to us. The four traits he unfolds are narcissism (self absorption/ individualism), pragmatism (efficiency of science is the final god), unbridled restlessness (our meaning comes from our agitated schedules and thinking), and the non-contemplative personality (awe is gone; reflection doesn't exist). We then inherit a culture that is “all about me”. Our offspring are dull and depressed to the divine. No longer in awe of God but bored by God. Our frantic schedules and unreflective lives start to say it all. Because of this children as young as 3 in our culture become medicated with mood altering drugs of prescription.

Many of you remember M. Scott Peck who wrote *The Road Less Traveled* and also *People of the Lie*. One of his earlier books was *A World Waiting to be Born: Civility Rediscovered*. This was a global insight into our human condition going insane. Mind you, Peck is a psychiatrist writing on positive development of the person. Later in his life he became Catholic through RCIA, keeping a low profile so he could connect with a larger base of the public. He walks through story after story of how we in our culture reward meanness, wrath, and vengeful ways. Working on both the larger community level and the personal level, his stories witness the loss of civility as normative in our hearts. Our patterns in forming families, he states, are morally destructive, causing callousness, manipulation, and materialism. His premise is that these become so ingrained and routine we do not even recognize them. The strength of this book is that Peck not only shows the case histories and dramatic scenarios, but also blueprints how organizations and individuals can be restored to health.

Again, showing the effects of the macro system, let me share a quote from John Attarian, a freelance writer, who wrote in *Modern Age*, summer of 1995 an article entitled “Thank You Tommy”:

The dominant ideology of our time—secular, determinist, materialist liberalism—is rabidly hostile to the heroic. Secularism and materialism deny the very existence of the soul and the reality of the transcendent perfection for which it yearns, thus denying the reality and validity of that yearning and with them the ultimate incentive for all true heroism. Determinism exculpates its believers from responsibility for their faults, hence relieving them of any need to improve themselves and removing the spur to heroic conduct. It denies people credit for their virtues, hence denying their worthiness of admiration and emulation. Thus the spread of liberalism has worked insidiously to purge the world of heroes. What survives as popular ‘heroes’ seldom merits the name: athletes, rock stars, movie and television actors; mere entertainers all.

Please note I have not mentioned religion with my references. It is culturally fashionable to be a bully. To live on rant and rage is the norm. Have you noticed the debasement that comes with entertainment – the put down or exposition of someone? Sometimes I love to jest that our world could never accept Jesus Christ because we are still having trouble with Dale Carnegie. We need to see the context in which we live. The big picture has converted us to fit in and be part of all this. The Church is not exempt from cultural influence. Having said that, let us move to the micro—the parish picture.

We have lowered the bar in our times. Often the question is, “What do I have to do to get by?” This happens at school, work, etc. Mediocrity has become the standard. Heroes are cardboard. Obviously this does not bode well with the spiritual quest of the soul. God again dies – or is killed.

THE TALE OF TWO CHURCHES: Parish Life

SVFP is a tale of two churches. One church is culturally formed and one is faith based. They are not equal in size. Filtering down from the macro system mentioned above, many

parishioners view church functions and the Sacraments as mere social events. They are “members” when they want some sacrament or something else. Based on the cultural customer satisfaction, they want ministry on demand. It’s all about them—“my” _____....you can fill in the request. Sacraments are show time, grandstanding events. It is not about Jesus Christ. It is about partying. Many of these folks are not familiar with a regular observance of the liturgical life of the Catholic faith. They are totally uncatechised. This means that they do not know what the present church teaching is, nor do they care. They will associate with the parish church building but not the faith community. They prefer to supply their own clergy from out-of-parish places. This group literally consumes massive hours of staff time. While that is well and good, it is an investment of little or no return. These are people who will not be part of the parish life. SVFP is a sacramental dispensary, which means sacraments on demand.

But ahhhh! the tale of the other church. These are a strong minority group based in faith. They are very dedicated to the struggles of raising children in a challenging culture that does not support family life. They are young and old. They know that Jesus Christ calls them to a larger world beyond the parish. They connect with one another. For them, the Church is the people, not a building. Their faith is the alternative culture. In the day school and the school of religion, this minority tries to change the world, the neighborhood, the parish, and even their very selves. The SVFP tale of this church is about *we* and not *me*. They are looking for Christ as that anchor of daily trial. These are the adorers, the daily Mass goers, and the engaged thrilled with the wedding/marriage resources. These are the many ministers at Mass who truly build into one their God given talents. This church is smaller than the first but is becoming stronger. These are the team players changing systems with all the pain that entails. These are the people who respect boundaries, authority, structures, and one another.

Profiling the Parish

There are many layers of faith to the SVFP community. One of the greatest struggles we face is that of moving toward a “theology of parish.” SVFP has many lovely people. A parish is a people bonding in faith with one another as they journey through the valleys of tears and joys. Too many people who associate with SVFP bond with the church building and its beauty and/or with a given priest. Buildings and clergy are all transitional. The people of God are the stabilizers who get us through.

The largest group in the parish, nearly 1000 households, holds membership on paper only. This falsifies the statistics of membership and finances. I will elaborate more on this later.

There is a small group who needs to be mentioned here because they are so very vocal. I am talking about adults who display negative attitudes and behavior toward the parish, its leadership and other parishioners. Sometimes this is seen in intimidation of staff, gossip, slander and detraction. They grumble and murmur behind people’s backs. Examples of this are anonymous phone messages/calls and letters, as well as vulgarity to staff members. While the culture we live in often models this behavior, it is clearly outside the bounds of what we would expect in a Christian community. It does not reflect well on the spirituality of these people, for it is in opposition to the teaching of Our Lord. I would say some of the behavior of this group is more vile than what I mentioned in the 2004 report. But there is good news: they are smaller in

number than I first perceived. The other good news is that they are not in positions of leadership.

We have a group of about 400 plus households who could be called the “salt of the earth.” They are dedicated in time, talent, and treasure to SVFP. Most are weekly Mass goers, and many are even daily worshippers. There is a true saintly quality in many of these folks, which I do not say casually. The depth of virtue and faith being applied by this membership is truly outstanding. In the time I have served here I find this group stepping forward to lead, to serve, to learn, to grow, and to belong. Silent and strong, they are the heart of SVFP. Even children and youth are part of this number.

Structuring Leadership

In the 2004 report the focus was on balancing charismatic leadership with structural leadership. The Archdiocese echoes this in a different vocabulary, calling parishes to develop a business model of responsible management (Bulletin, 12 December 2004). Pastors have been required to attend management school. Structures of sound business practices are being incorporated.

Spiritual life and structures are related. The church calls us to structure in our life. The structure of weekly Mass in personal and family life is normative. Ignoring this structure is sinful unless sickness or travel prevents it. Our holy habits flow from the structures of our lives. All sacramental preparations call us to the structure of Christ holding us together from within. “The family that prays together is the family that stays together” is a structural statement.

One of the lost structures of our Catholic heritage are the use of holy space. Church requires quiet, which means pagers and cell phones should be turned off. No hats on men. No gum, food or drink in church. Clothing should be modest—minimal flesh with shoulders, midriff, and upper legs covered. We have lost these structures and need to return to them.

Time is a structure. Coming late and leaving early for Mass is a personal structural flaw. Even though this is going to happen once in a while for everyone, when it is chronic and normative it is a spiritual deficit. There are ways to enter late and leave early when that is necessary without disrupting the Mass by drawing attention to one’s self.

At this point I will name structures introduced or more deeply developed in the last year. Cardinal George has asked for full disclosure of information about parishes, which includes not just finances, but the full breadth of parish life, to the people. (Note: Full disclosure still respects professional and personnel boundaries.) The structural changes outlined below follows no particular order. Our plan is to have for each ministry “tri-fold” brochures and information on our parish website so that it will all be readily available to parishioners.

+ *Marriage/Wedding Programs*

The parish website now has a full section of norms, guidelines, and requirements for both weddings and marriage preparation. This site also has an FAQ (frequently asked questions) section. John and Cathy Gaughan wrote a rough draft of the manual that is

available on-line. Under their leadership, the lead couples are now meeting with the engaged in homes. This is where the results of the personality inventories are shared with the engaged. We now have about four annual workshops on learning how to plan a Roman Rite Catholic wedding. We also trained wedding coordinators to assist in planning, conduct the rehearsal and to be present for the weddings. So far, these processes have proved to be a great blessing. Those going through it express much gratitude and appreciation. Remember our younger generations prefer structure.

+ *Funeral Guidelines*

In recent practice in our country, many funerals were drifting from the Roman Rite practices, becoming too informal and often including inappropriate music and language. We have completed the tri-fold brochure and in addition, all the music, readings, and options for the grieving families are available on the parish website.

+ *Baptismal Preparation*

The three couples that conduct this preparation have initiated a new focus: "Welcome home!" It is often the case that young couples have not been practicing their faith, thus this process can be a moment of evangelization. People are invited to see their new responsibilities in the faith through their child. The structure of a letter for Godparents and sponsors is now standard.

SVF Day School

+ *Day School Worship*

Communal Penance services are offered in Advent and Lent for grades 3 to 8. Grade 2-8 rotate going to the daily noon Mass. Special prayer services are offered seasonally as well, such as Stations of the Cross and weekly rosary. While all students continue to learn about the Eucharist, a special effort is made for the 5th and 6th grades to learn the Mass and how to serve. While everyone learns the method, each student makes the decision on whether or not they desire to serve. "All school" Masses continue to increase in frequency and quality. The students are schooled in Church etiquette. This is an area that has suffered in our culture of informality.

+ *Leadership Training*

Faculty of the day school and parish school of religion now join with staff in leadership training and celebrations. Leadership workshops both off and on campus are more common, more faith-focused. The first of these was in August of 2004 at Trinity High School.

+ *Kindergarten Blessing*

At the end of Kindergarten, the class receives a blessing during a prayer service rather than a graduation ceremony. Parents are present as we recognize their journey into 1st grade.

+ *Curriculum*

The math curriculum has been upgraded with university professors working with teachers to improve effectiveness.

+ *Parent Club*

This group is vibrant and focused on the well being of the community. They have spearheaded a series of parenting talks on mind, body, and soul. The lunch program is becoming healthier. Providing projects and events for both fun and fundraising has been their strength. The silent auction with “April in Paris” was a well-done first year ministry in stewardship.

+ *School Board*

This leadership group has provided clear, strong direction for the children in both body and soul. Technical, computer, and other resources of the school grow constantly with their guidance.

+ *Protecting God’s Children*

This training session from Virtus, required by the Archdiocese for all volunteers and employees who deal with minors or work while they are present, has been offered many times on the premises. In addition, nearby parish sites are available to those who consult the Archdiocesan website. All current clergy, clerical, faculty, administrative, and maintenance employees have completed this training. Our own Karen Dix of the School of Religion is a qualified instructor in this ministry.

+ *Worship Office*

This ministry has been newly established since last summer. Training sessions for the ministries of music, hospitality, lector, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, sacristan, and server have all been updated and will be offered on a regular basis. Art and environment committee is under this office. Ministering full-time as director is Steve Senski. Vince Zaprzal, a Dominican University student, ministers part-time.

We continue to struggle with the entertainment model in liturgy. This is not limited to SVFP. Our culture wants entertainment; we are spectators. When we come to worship we prefer being passive and not participative. Proof of this would be comments like “I don’t get anything out of it,” or “it is not fun going to church”. These statements flow from an uncatechized theology or understanding of true worship.

+ *Pastoral Care Department*

This is the area ministering to the homebound, the bereaved, the widowed/widowers, and those experiencing family troubles or marriage difficulties. This area has needed some attention. Fr. Michael Kyte leads this department. Since much of pastoral care is referral to the greater resources of the area, meeting with these various groups is a major component of his work. He is beginning to create a resource manual to allow for easier referral from the parish office. *Care Notes from Abbey Press* is a Catholic series on dealing with the challenges of life. Our magazine rack has titles for kids, teens, and adults. They are so popular that we cannot keep the rack supplied. Ministers of care, parish outreach, and parish food resources are all part of this ministry.

+ *Parish Office*

Office hours have been expanded and offices have been made more user-friendly. Desk workers are trained in a uniform method. *Parish Data Systems* software upgrades have been ordered. PDS is a program making parishes more efficient through computer technology. Clerical workers now have a resource manual. The use of maintenance request forms is now normative for the SVFP campus.

+ *CPA Expansion*

The role of the Business Manager has now expanded to include building, grounds, and office management. Jean Finnegan is in her first full year in this expanded position. We are planning to launch a buildings & grounds committee that will work within the Business Manager's department.

+ *Performance Reviews*

Performance reviews were conducted with all faculty and staff. We all consider this an important step in the process of team building. As we go forward, job descriptions will be written with more precision and accountability. The Archdiocesan management model of leadership and business requires this step.

+ *Master Calendar*

It may be assumed that we operate under a master calendar, but this has not yet been accomplished. To achieve this, we need both a technical tool and a spirit of cooperation to share our common spaces. In the past we have had many calendars within the parish. We are creating a single, master calendar; which is truly a structure of leadership.

+ *Technological/Computer Ministry*

Fr. Al Judy is constantly upgrading the in-office and parish technology. He updates the website. At present he is scouting for software methods that will serve SVFP better; the weekly bulletin is also in his charge. Our web site is on the agenda to be upgraded because of its great use.

+ *Day school and School of Religion Working Together*

Both schools work together on the first sacraments of Communion, Reconciliation and Confirmation, under the leadership of the Director of Faith Formation. The server program (5th grade) is also part of their combined efforts. They share the same Advent and Lent days for Reconciliation. The May Crowning this year included a court of students from both schools and was celebrated on a Sunday Mass in early May. As to the important task of faith formation, both schools should be of the same quality and focus. Our parish does not operate in a "First Class" vs. "Coach" style of programming.

+ *Newcomers Committee*

This is the offspring of the parish council seeking to welcome our newest members. In its beginning stages, it includes everything from a coffee/donut gathering to just an email or phone call saying "welcome." It has been noted that many newcomers do not want too much "welcome" lest they feel solicited into being overly committed. Our goal is to

provide our new people with the level of involvement with which they are comfortable.

+ *Literature Rack*

Besides the Care Notes mentioned in pastoral care structuring, we also have tri-folds. These are simple, concise overviews of common questions of parish life, such as Sacraments, membership, funeral norms, annulments, etc. There are 20 + labeled areas for these in the rack area. Some are yet to be designed but are in process. Putting such information into writing contributes to the ideal of structural leadership.

+ *School of Religion*

The new Director of Faith Formation, Karen Dix, has made some structural changes for the Elementary program. Each catechist now receives a syllabus for the year. This includes liturgical events, dates of classes, lessons, and suggestions for other resources, such as videos and speakers. Communication between the day school and school of religion on plans for First Eucharist, First Reconciliation, and Confirmation has been timely and in writing. A Religion Resource room has been added for both school teachers and catechists.

+ *Physical Plant*

Both building upkeep and cleanliness have been a priority. Several volunteers have come forward to clean up the grounds. Major structural expenses this year include the \$150,000 boiler in the school building. The gym and school library have been roofed this summer. The air conditioner compressor for the offices was located on the east sacristy roof. It went out on us last month so we relocated it outside the offices. The sewer from the church's west side to Lathrop has collapsed tiles for draining. Raw sewage was coming up outside church. The reason for the hand blowers in the bathroom is because folks were putting paper towels down the toilets. The sewer will be repaired this summer. With the gym being roofed, the inside will need to be repaired and painted. The monthly second collection for "buildings" goes into all this. We depleted it with the boiler surprise.

+ *Parish Committees and Boards*

Many committees and boards are reviewing their own structures. Some have rewritten their mode of operation. This is always a good sign of growth—Reflect, Review, Rewrite, and Renew. Various groups and committees are learning to use the bulletin as the primary structure of communication. Clear and simple writing of the realities of our operations is the most needed inner structure for SVFP.

+ *Marketing committee*

This committee was founded to connect with the four existing leadership groups of SVFP.: parish council, finance board, school of religion board, and school board. This marketing committee will be a resource by working with grants, businesses, members, patrons, alumni, etc. They will be addressing the image of SVFP as seen from the outside.

Staff Structures

In the past three years there has been a turnover of all the professional staff of the parish. Some of the secretarial, faculty, and maintenance staff have been here more than three years. Regarding structural adjustments and changes, there is nothing more challenging than personnel itself. Staff is working with new staff. Some have only been on deck for a matter of months. As is mentioned in the bulletin from 6 February 2005, patience is most required.

Staff is basically the structure for volunteer organizations. SVFP has a low number of volunteers. What happens is that the staff works for parishioners instead of with parishioners. This can work for a brief time but has a fast burn out. When staff have to go elsewhere to feed their faith or when they are exhausted, working way beyond their job descriptions, then there is a red alert. A great question of soul is to always ask yourself, “how has my faith nourished this paid minister?”

Volunteers

Many folks find that their daily life is unrewarding—even on their jobs. Statistics show us that volunteerism culturally follows the quest for meaning and results from purpose which is not being met in the workplace and marketplace. These studies also show that volunteers want clearly defined structures with whatever they do.

At SVFP we have many wonderful volunteers. The numbers are not large. However, keep in mind that the parish membership is padded and exaggerated. Therefore, the volunteers are in proportion to our membership of several hundred families.

The structures defining the need and value of volunteers can be made more articulate. This is becoming ever more true on boards and committees redefining themselves. Specifically, this is even truer with the ministries of the Mass. When someone or their substitute doesn't show, the prayer level of that Mass becomes very difficult. Everybody goes scurrying to cover. This is the reason for no communion ministers at the cross aisle—shortage of ministers who show. (Mind you, it is wrong to offer communion in the form of bread with no cups because of the shortage of ministers. That is what communion at the cross aisle had become.) Seldom do we have a 100% turnout of all ministries at any given Mass.

All ministries are valuable; all ministers are needed. Thinking that we don't matter belittles the depth of the Eucharist. God calls us from within to minister and from that space we say “yes, my Lord”. That “yes” is an over and over response to the divine.

Eucharist Our Source and Summit

+ *The Year of the Eucharist*

The dominant structure of our Catholic existence is the Holy Eucharist. Oct. 2004 –Oct 2005 is “**The Year of the Eucharist**” in our Roman Catholic Church as declared by John Paul II. Our parish will focus on the Eucharist this fall, through educational and evangelization efforts. Our bulletin continues to run the “52 reasons to go to church”. This is based in 52 behavior studies of lives that are changed because of Sunday worship.

Many have thanked me for this addition and say they send it on to friends and families. One of our tri-folds is called “Keeping Holy the Sabbath.”

Unfortunately many of our children are not experiencing the Holy Eucharist as the high point of their week since so many families do not attend. Only one in four of our families worship weekly. It seems that some of our children believe that Sunday worship is optional. Our modern culture often seems to go against the holiness we seek as Catholics. These problems are not limited to SVFP but are national and even global. God bless that minority of parents who are forming their children with “the classroom” of Sunday church. Crying babies and restless little ones are welcome, even if the parents are distracted. Just being there is the prayer. Sunday worship is a needed family structure.

The Chicago Archdiocese is in the process of introducing a norm for all school athletic practices and games. Nothing may take place on Sunday morning before noon. This would be a structure creating the priority of the Eucharist in our lives.

+ *Mass Attendance*

Again, there are many in SVFP who DO live the Eucharist as the source and summit of their lives. Attendance at the two daily Masses attest to this. The noon Mass in Lent needed six Extraordinary Ministers because of the volume of the assembly. This attendance is larger than some of the weekend Masses. Those who regularly participate in Eucharistic Adoration are another group who see the Eucharist as the “source and summit” of their lives. The day that we have perpetual adoration with people of all ages taking their turn will be a holy moment in the parish’s journey of faith. Wouldn’t 24/7 perpetual adoration be a welcome grace in our parish?!

+ *Sacred Space*

Our goal is to create an atmosphere of quiet when entering our church. For Eucharist to be the source and summit, it means respect of sacred space. Church is to be a place of quiet. The talking that goes on should be to God. The listening should be listening to God’s word spoken in the quiet of our hearts and out loud in worship. Unfortunately, we see many examples of people acting as though they are at a social event instead of sacred liturgy. Another aspect that dishonors the space is clothing. Some men have forgotten that hats are not acceptable. Clothing in church should be worthy of church. Shorts, gym clothes, provocative tee shirts, and other distracting clothes are not appropriate in a sacred space. Remember the words “Sunday Best”? It can still have meaning for us. As in most places, we have the problem of cell phones, and even food, drink and gum. (This is at its worst when we have sacraments that have unchurched Catholics—weddings, first communions, confirmations and sometimes even funerals.) If church is not a part of our regular habits, we will be somewhat estranged to the protocol of the environment.

+ *Source & Summit*

Once we lose Eucharist as the source and summit of our life schedule, we have lost what it is to be Catholic. The renewal of our parish devotion to the Eucharist is truly an ongoing challenge to us all. This loss of regular church attendance is the heartbreak of

many grandparents. It is the frustration of many staff. It is the challenge most clearly laid before us by John Paul II. When we wonder what has happened to the Catholic Church, we are really tracking the problem directly to the abdication of the Eucharist as the source and summit of our faith. Our new “German shepherd” Benedict XVI echoes this message because it is our Catholic call and duty.

Sacraments of the Church

All of our catechesis for sacraments is focused on the inward character, the inner life of Jesus within us. Sacraments are not learning about Jesus; sacraments are about becoming Jesus. Our faith in Jesus should be the most important thing in our lives. Unfortunately, we see some evidence that sacraments are often more about the social occasion than the spiritual aspects of the day. We see extremes of dress and “over the top” behavior. Some families enroll their children for the “first sacrament grades” and do not return until it is time for the next one. Some parishioners view sacraments as commodities, or only family events, when in fact they are celebrations of the whole church. Sacraments can become simply social commodities. There is a major drainage of spirit and morale for staff and volunteers who journey heart and soul with families into a sacrament not to experience them again. This is truly a feeling of being used.

Permit me a story. There are daily stories but this one captures much of what I am saying that may seem like theory. I was at a wedding reception when a man in his 30’s approached in conversation. Affirming, pleasant, and inquisitive, we chatted. Even in his youth, this man was already a high profile businessman. He said he was from the New England area originally, had lived many places in the world including the orient. His faith background was Methodist but limited in his catechesis of his faith. As the conversation unfolded he was at SVFP for several sacraments—the wedding we were just coming from, a baptism sometime earlier, and Mass itself. As a single man he was not church going in any faith but talked about how much religion meant to him. He wanted those structures for his perhaps someday marriage and children rearing. Here is where he expressed confusion. He apologized for being honest and then observed that these people made a big deal out of the Sacraments but did not seem to take them seriously. He said that they did not seem to act reverently in church; he said it seemed like a big show. This gentleman observed that the Catholics present did not know the prayers or sing; they seemed even confused when to sit, stand, or follow the services. He further observed that the Catholics he knew from this family do not go to church at all. Here is where he asked me to explain the Catholic faith to him. He was confused. My response was simply “thank you for the honesty”. I went on to say that what you see is all too normal but not part of our Catholic teachings. I told him he hit the target of sacramental neglect and abuse. He then said that “it must be hard for you people who lead the singing, the prayers and all not getting depressed with this kind of stuff”. Well, that was another thank you. This simple common story captures how we are always an example. Would not it have been wonderful if his experiences of the Catholic community would have made him question the possibility of his joining us? He could not see the faith in the picture. Unfortunately this is not a rare story; it mirrors that reality that we are shaped by culture more than faith—my starting point of this report.

There is a new term used called “bridezilla” which even has a series for TV. It simply shows the over-the-top profile of our culture. Here at SVFP we have had no guidelines for weddings.

They are all now on web with great clarity. What had happened is the Roman Rite of Matrimony had to give in to the Hollywood show time. Weddings can and will be lavish in the comfortable of the culture. Church is not the place to grandstand. The guidelines for wedding and marriage respect cultural customs and traditions but most of all are authentic to the Roman Rite. The church building had too often become a hall rented for pictures, drinking, eating, and literally sacrileges. We are back to structures to protect the holy. One bride complimented the parish on the website's clarity and excellence of the printed guidelines. She said, "You need those for those people who do all the abuses in the church." There were several things she proceeded to want to do, feeling she was exempt from the guidelines and norms for the marriage rite. This is called the narcissism that Rolheiser talks about at the beginning of this report.

Confirmation is often seen as a Sacrament of graduation rather than discipleship. At a recent high profile Mass, there were people in the back of the Church eating French fries during the celebration. I do not make these things up. All of these attitudes are being addressed in our sacramental preparation, but it will take generations to make a difference. Our Cardinal Francis George claims at present we have lost the last three generations of Catholics to the habits, practices and experiences of our traditions.

Catechesis of the Parish

Catechesis is the ongoing learning of the truths of our faith. We never arrive at the fullness of our faith until our Mass of Christian Burial. At SVFP we do have difficulty with catechesis on all age levels. Our adult education series is very poorly attended. As a matter of fact, there was no adult education for years because so few came. My understanding of ministry as pastor is that I am obligated to offer various and seasonal sessions for the improvement of the soul. We continue to try sessions for parents, for general adult population, for specific needs—few come. While most of our young students are eager to learn more about Jesus and the Gospel, some of the young people have an attitude that they do not want to learn about the faith. This might be because they do not see the adults in their lives wanting to learn more.

Some of the older folks say that this spiritual pathology of SVFP has been around for decades. One very articulate old timer told me, "St Vincent's has never been into that learning stuff." This is a Dominican embarrassment because our house (Priory) and Order have many academically accomplished brothers who could share much with the parish. We also have many other resources within easy reach for our parishioners' growth, including a Catholic University in our geographic boundaries.

Healthy catechesis will take us to the global village of our universal catholic church. It will take us beyond ourselves. In our consumer world we are in danger of being suffocated by our own needs and wants. That would be the definition of what Rolheiser calls narcissism. The Second Vatican Council of the 1960's introduced sacramental catechesis because people were becoming lax and presumptuous in the faith. Again, when we return to the Eucharist, much of our catechesis will be accomplished within the Sunday liturgy. Do you hear healthy structuring in all this?

Administration

Moving toward the business model mentioned earlier, the parish is well on that road. Personnel practices, “Best Practices” of the Archdiocese, etc. are all being implemented at SVFP, even more so now than in the past. The Chicago Archdiocese is one of the largest in the world, and so their resources are outstanding. Even though we have used their structures in the past, they are part of the everyday life of our office.

A structure in the making is a manual for the parish. This manual will define boundaries, processes, contacts, etc. Staff often becomes blindsided by the way things are done in good intentions, yet not know their sources or perhaps get only skeletal information. Sometimes this will even be with structures outside the parish in the name of the parish. This is a normal occurrence in an over-weighted charismatic leadership system. Creating structural leadership in balance with charismatic leadership makes for a vibrant and healthy community. It opens wider the doors to new blood, saying not only *welcome*, but also defining boundaries which healthy leaders/volunteers appreciate.

Stewardship/Finances

I have never preached about money since I arrived—either as administrator or pastor. My goal is to have full disclosure of moneys at all times. I sent a mass-mailing fact letter with the IRS statements to all claiming membership. In former years this was not done. Anyone donating above \$50.00 was thanked for contributing to the parish. This group is less than 500 households. To those who gave less than \$50.00 per year, there was a letter explaining membership. The reason for the \$50 number is because it costs about that per year to send envelopes, mailers, and to keep up on the membership record. To these I asked them to pray and reflect on their financial relationship with the parish. One of my goals in the years ahead is to clean up the membership census. We have nearly 1,000 households who are showing SVFP membership but with no activity. An empty envelope still denotes an active member. It is not just about money. When a family has a proven hardship, and is unable to pay tuition, we ask the person to drop even empty envelopes into the basket to show their attendance.

There has been some confusion on moneys, both individually and with groups. Federal banking regulations demand that all not-for-profit establishments have one signer to all documents. Therefore, when the name of *St. Vincent Ferrer Parish* is used, the pastor, who is the CEO of the not-for-profit organization, must sign all financial documents. These rules do not reflect a lack of trust. We believe that all the volunteers and paid staff working with money are trustworthy. These are federal banking norms and not exclusively ours.

In the same vein there are clear guidelines for a donation. Only donations are tax deductible. Tuition, wedding fees, funeral fees, and the like are not tax deductible. We cannot issue tax statements for these expenses. Many folks do not like to give to the everyday operations of the parish, but instead like to donate to projects and causes within SVFP. We are printing a list of donation possibilities. Designated donations must be used for what the donor designated. If not, the money needs to be returned. These do qualify for tax-deductible status.

The 2004-2005 budget had some unexpected spending surprises. Exiting the budget we looked very good because of fat trimming. The big money spending is in two areas: 1) the \$150,000 boiler replacement—which had threatened to cancel its parish membership for the last 9 years. 2) the \$85,000.00 payment on our millennium campaign loan is coming due in the coming year. The full loan is about \$600,000.00. This loan will then be within the budget to be repaid in a ten year window. The money that was saved for the building emergency went into the boiler cost. Your parish is like many homes—living from intake to output. We may appear rich, but we certainly are not.

The good news going into the 2005-2006 budget is that it is balanced. The Bishop recommended that we prepare to repay the loan as soon as possible by bringing the school subsidy down from \$50,000 to \$25,000 per year. He also suggested that we freeze tuition. This balanced budget decreases the school subsidy and also freezes tuition.

That small group of holy households holding SVFP together in ministry are the same who are very generous with treasure. They budget and tithe for the Lord. Their money is where their faith is. If those who donate nothing now would donate as little as \$1 per week, we would be in a very financially blessed space. About ¼ of the parish supports the entire parish. The formula for success in parish giving is not the amount that is given but the number of households who give. The secret is the volume. Here again is a structure that could transform the parish.

Living in the Global Village

SVFP has some great beginnings with respect to reaching out to the greater world of need. Our twinning parish, Pius V, has been a constant witness to those who are in need of bonding in the Spirit. Our biannual Mass exchange is well organized. The rummage sale, Christmas store, etc... are all good examples of this quest for justice.

There are some 20 plus second collections per year for specifically designated charities. SVFP does help with their monies. Praise God!

The school programs should have more and constant “third world” experience. Project Heifer is a great example. For example, the school has already begun participating in the Heifer Project. Through this program, students raise money in order to supply a family in a poor nation with a cow, which is used as a beast of burden by the family. Since this project helps families in more than 125 countries, the students are not only able to help families in need, they also learn about the geography, culture, and faith traditions of these global neighbors, and thereby increase their sense of global awareness and solidarity. Families going to ‘paradise’ vacations could be using part of their time with the locals in projects--builders give their building skills, medical folks their gifts, etc. Families can literally labor together for the gospel to come to life.

Living in the global village world should energize people with the blessings that come from this ministry. Beyond the money are the labors of love. While enjoying the blessings of comfort in our SVFP world, we never want to isolate ourselves from those most broken and vulnerable. Youth could use this model for service projects that go beyond short-term requirements. They

could sponsor a project, village, etc. We at SVFP could plug into mega systems doing these corporal works of mercy, adding our grace to theirs.

Youth Ministry

There is no youth ministry at SVFP. This is one of my biggest heartaches. Please bear in mind that when I spoke of holy people in our parish, some of these are our youth. Any youth involvement is in the larger parish. By this I mean that they need to incorporate themselves somehow in the “adult” level of parish life, and some do. We have sacristans in their teen years. While that is good for some of the youths, it does not work for the faith of the ordinary teen.

The 2004 report mentioned three positions that did not exist at SVFP: Liturgist, Pastoral Care Director, and Youth Minister. The two former positions are filled. Thank God! The latter was on the budget and got cut to make budget. This position will remain on the list of designated donations in the bulletin with hope, prayer, and a profound need. In a recent village meeting between Oak Park and River Forest concerning youth, the statistics reveal that violence increased in the last year among youth. Gang activities are also increasing. Faith is the factor of growth at all ages but in our younger years we are shaped for life. Jesus has much to offer these kids. Have you ever thought of Jesus as a structure? His rock reference is just that.

Naming grace

On February 2nd of this year we celebrated the 1st annual Appreciation Night for all our various ministries. Those who volunteer are the grace of the parish. It was a very fun night—no business, just enjoyment of one another. The faculty and staff set up, served the meal, cleaned up and made both appetizers plus desserts. Steve Senski conducted the entertainment. Karen Dix organized the structuring of the entire evening.

Sometimes there is a gravity at SVFP; an intensity that is too intense. This night was a “let-us-play” evening where folks were truly in a mood of levity. This was universal to the gathering. No commands or demands on folks but simply enjoyment of God’s blessings in our midst. This event is definitely a keeper.

1931 to 2006 = 75th anniversary of SVFP

The planning of the celebrations for the parish’s 75th Anniversary is underway. Cardinal George will be with us on January 8, 2006, celebrating the Epiphany of the Lord at the 11am Sunday Mass. The 75th will conclude on Christ the King Sunday, Nov 26th 2006. Each month we plan for something to happen spiritually, socially, in the schools, and more. In the regularly scheduled events we hope to focus on our history and heritage. A dinner/dance is planned among other events. This is to be the year of a photo directory of the parish. Many groups of people are currently meeting to structure the celebration. The bulletin addressed this also for the Sunday of 21 November 2004.

Applied Christianity

At SVFP we struggle with applied Christianity. This has its roots in a lack of quiet and awe for the sacred. In our secular, overly busy society, many people do not seem to know what to do in a quiet prayerful setting. We need to address the spirituality of the parish on a deep level. Psalm 46 reminds us to “be still and know that I am God.” This deep sense of God in our lives brings us to worship, to honor and respect our sacred space and sacraments.

Belonging to the Catholic Church, or any religion for that matter, is a quest of identity. What has flowed into SVFP from our consumer, materialistic culture is the tendency to treat religion as an idea. Spirituality is applied Christianity. Through my preaching I have tried to promote the application of our beliefs. All the Masses, sacraments, devotions, and prayers serve for nothing when we misuse them to justify our mediocrity, our hatred, or our sinful ways. Applied Christianity is the struggle to become Christ in a world that wants Him no more today than when Jesus walked. The mystery of the Incarnation is God in our skin—our flesh. That is not an idea. That is an identity. The blessed burden of the gospel is awesome empowerment. When we trivialize faith to arguing over ideas, we remove the focus on our own souls. When we justify our absence from sacraments, weekly Sunday Mass and parish connectedness, we have not applied Christianity in our earthly journey. At each Mass we are called to receive the “Body of Christ”. We are what we eat. We all hunger for the identity that can make our lives more meaningful. Applied Christianity is being convicted of who we say we are. If you were on trial for being Christian, would they have enough evidence to convict you? Without this depth of reality, religion can be the easiest and best place to avoid God. Religion can then become a mere social statement.

On a personal note

In my family we joke about me in this job. The reason is that my older brother retired at 50 and my younger sister at 55. I am 60 this past year working the toughest job of my life. That is not a complaint but the irony of Church. Remember that Fr. Kilbridge is just about the pope’s age.

The toughness of this ministry is the volume. Being an itinerant preacher for 12 years had lots of hours but most were on the road, waiting in airports, and studying. This first year is a shock to my body and soul with the demands and volume of the job. Much of the volume of the job is lack of structures that have inefficient dialogues.

Structure is also civility. Being barked at or defending staff who are bullied are structural voids that shock me. Threats, ultimatums, and control games may be structures of function for some but are not civil. Yes, this is very, very few people but nonetheless real. I am no shrinking-violet style personality, but such anti-Christian behavior has never fit the norm of even my secular existence. I cannot be courted into administering sacraments, favors, etc for anyone. Structures create an even playing field. Living without them is personal inner terrorism for me.

One of my overused lines this past year is that I am going to get a *SVFP patch*. I say that every time I stand in the headlights of something I never had a clue about. “Now how would I have known that?” The answer comes back that this is the way it always has been done. “That’s fine, but how would I have known that?” This is an example of charismatic leadership. The person becomes the tradition or the norm. The minister becomes the ministry.

One thing I do know is that I am a man of structure. Blame it on my Luxembourg/German roots if you wish, but it is both my gift and my curse. If I can bring any gift to SVFP, it will be structures that nurture. I need structure; I do not fly by the seat of my pants. Working without structures exhausts all involved very quickly.

Some feel I should get out of SVFP as soon as possible. They feel I am not right for the job. They think I am stern, rigid, and demanding. When crude and rude behavior attacks frequent the sacraments, the church space, the staff, other parishioners, etc, I do not roll over. Believe me, I have daily opportunities to be classified as mean. I never holler. I do not scold. I attempt to inform and catechize. I'd call it structure. When folks are hearing what they don't want to hear, much drama can enter the reporting of the information. Being *pastoral* is not giving people what they want and when they want it. Pastoral is bringing heart to the structures. Structures protect the sacramental life of the church. Even if I were not here, the need for structures will remain for the faith community to flourish in faith. Anything less is back to sacraments on demand.

Please know also that I am willing **not** to be the one for this ministry of pastor. I do not covet this job. I do it as a ministry. I would not see it as failure on my part or the parish to not be a fit—so to speak. What you see is what you get. I will continue to structure and restructure. We need to create and recreate structures, allowing them to breath new life and affirm our parish in the process. Even though I need structures they need not be my structures. Believe me when I say I am not interested in reinventing the wheel. Structural leadership for me is a non negotiable. The lack of structural leadership in any institution will deteriorate the system in short or extended periods of time.

An insight that I have experienced is that youth love structures. You want to see youth? Create loving structures. For National Pastor Appreciation Day the school students wrote me individual letters. The reoccurring theme of the content both last year and this year thanked me for structures that have been put into place in the school or the parish. Out of the mouths of babes! I get to the school very little compared to what I would wish; to the school of religion even less. I am convinced that in the structures of these rooms is the structure of our faith.

I am looking forward to the day when the structures are so in place that I can enjoy being free to connect more with all the flock. Building fences and tearing down barriers is labor intensive. Staff and volunteers feel this in a real way. Bless your vision, patience, and love of the structures building lives and families of grace.

The State of SVFP's Soul

You have read much for reflection. Even though this report is for this past fiscal year, the obvious reality is what is mentioned herein is larger than one year. Reflection will form us better as we see who we are; who we were; and who we are becoming. SVFP has been a great source of grace for three-fourths of a century, and it will continue to be so. At this point in her history she has an outstanding faculty, valued catechists, dedicated staff, seven ordained ministers— four priests & three deacons, with a very faithful and faith-filled core assembly.

From this wellspring of hope, tomorrow will be holier. The greater Church of Chicago and the world are ever rebuilding into the source and summit of strength that is needed. Whatever the future of SVFP will be lies within its people. All else comes and goes—such as the priests, faculty, and staff. The passionate volunteer is that servant who renews the face of the earth and this parish. The SVFP soul? ...in process, to quote Dickens, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. These are the times that try men’s souls.” The harvest is great! Laborers wanted. Inquire within—deep within.

Thomas D. Noesen, O.P.

Pastor
1 July 2005