



HOLY FAMILY PARISH

FOUNDED 1946

Sunday, June 8, 2025
Solemnity of Pentecost

Dear Parishioners of Holy Family Parish,

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I am writing this pastoral letter to initiate a strategic vision and plan for our parish of Holy Family. The initiation of this significant parish effort is the fruit of prayer, many conversations with parishioners, and the seeking of counsel from various priests and church leaders. In this letter I desire to communicate to you the origins of this pastoral effort, to demonstrate a foundation from both the Gospel and Church leaders that supports a parish initiative such as this, to highlight the general areas and scope of this vision, and to offer you a message of encouragement as we collectively enter into a new effort within our parish life and begin initial action steps. It is my intention and hope that starting this process during the conclusion of the Easter Season and upon the Solemnity of Pentecost, this parish-wide effort will be, first, blessed by the Holy Spirit's gifted accompaniment and counsel.

Origins

Shortly after my arrival at Holy Family, I had discerned that it would be beneficial to host listening sessions where many people in our parish of various ages could attend and share. As you may remember, these hosted sessions were called "Heritage and Hopes", and they allowed many of us to recall the rich history of our Catholic parish community, while also naming desires and hopes for our future. Many of the memories shared held a special place within our personal faith journeys, touching upon childhood memories of sacramental formation, teachers and religious encountered in the grade school, important junctures where God had built parish community throughout our almost 80 year history, previous clergy or lay ministers who were central to our growth, and much more. I believe these communal gatherings bore much fruit not only in the area of sharing gratitude, but in growing our anticipation for continued growth and blessings to be received in the years ahead.

I was personally very moved by these gatherings. A fresh set of questions began emerging in my prayer, such as "What does the Lord desire *next* within our parish's life?" Conversations with parishioners, both planned and spontaneous, about what was essential for us to discern within our parish's life and ministry increased in frequency. Many consistently identified future endeavors of evangelizing about our Catholic Faith throughout Stow, increasing the support of our parish grade school through wider parishioner participation, adopting additional service efforts to the wider community, establishing more confident practices of personal prayer, hosting more

Scripture studies and inter-generational catechetical evenings, and growing the number of adorers visiting our Adoration Chapel, as well as many others. The beginning images of a parish-wide initiative began to take shape. I then established a strategic envisioning team in the early part of 2024, about 14 months after arriving at Holy Family, and their efforts began on the Solemnity of Pentecost, May 19, 2024. Since that time, this group of parishioners - members of parish council, finance council, parish staff, Holy Family School staff, and others - began the process of praying together and identifying values that were central to our identity here at Holy Family.

Four values, especially, emerged as essential in directing our more specific goals and steps in the years ahead:

- A Welcoming Home
- Encountering Jesus Christ
- Eucharistic Worship
- Inspiring Saints

This team next discerned specific and achievable goals that helped to pursue these values; the strategic plan took a more final form as a wider list of goals focused upon growth in the areas of: community, prayer & worship, evangelization, service, various capital improvements, increasing the Catholic culture of Holy Family grade school, and others. These values and the accompanying list of more specific goals have been shared and discussed multiple times with both parish and finance council members, as well as staff members, who have all voiced positive support for this initiative.

Watching the Signs of the Times

As many Catholics have noticed, there are numerous cultural changes just over the last few decades that have strongly impacted a practice of faith for both the family and individual disciple. Practices that have built faith foundations for centuries have rapidly become less visible, such as attending Mass weekly, having our children and grandchildren baptized or prepared to receive further sacraments, speaking up about faith in our professional environments, a family making time to say the rosary together, sacrificing for Catholic education and formation, upholding the ideals of Christian marriage and family, making daily time for personal prayer, and numerous others. There is a strong current from secular influences that carry many away from building Christ's kingdom, or that at minimum offer a strong distraction.

Our Church universally, but especially within the American context, is going through a theological and pastoral reflection of how to best respond to the shifting away from Christian-centered models that were well-known not long ago.¹ By identifying many of these cultural shifts, our Church's leaders and many of her faithful are convinced of an ever-increasing need for Christian disciples to intentionally prioritize a personal friendship with Jesus Christ, to receive the peace and encouragement that comes only from this closeness, and to then help others to taste the joy of the Christian journey once again, or maybe for the first time. If we ourselves have known the words of our Lord Jesus to be true, "I have come so that they may

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/>

have life, and have it more abundantly (John 10:10),” we will hunger for everyone to have this same fulfillment. Therefore, with a desire for all hearts to be more on fire, a parish-wide effort that aims at widening our invitation for many to encounter Christ, to engage in prayer and sacramental participation, to experience parish community, and to pursue the best version of ourselves, all seem to be well-timed and necessary.

Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, our previous Popes have renewed the call for Catholic faithful to engage in a new mission of evangelization. Following the Lord’s Great Commission to go out to the world, sharing the joys and even the fruitful struggles of this Christian way of life, and inviting others into this Way through Baptism, is now more than ever in our lifetimes, a pressing apostolate for each member of the Church. St. John Paul II, who wrote prolifically about this effort, referring to it as the “New Evangelization,” described that our efforts must be “new in ardor, methods, and expression²”. For him, it was not a beneficial step taken by a few established teachers, as much as it was an urgent mission for a great majority of the Christian faithful. From the first words of his Pontificate, when he said, “Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ!”³ he and other Church leaders have aimed at proclaiming Jesus Christ as the hope of humanity and the joy of every heart. Even within the last few years with Pope Francis promulgating “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (“The Joy of the Gospel”), more and more Catholics on all levels of discipleship have identified the need for us to become refreshed and innovative in the work of evangelization in the midst of a world that, without faith, is often dissipating to our hearts.

A source of this invitation and encouragement for our local Diocese of Cleveland has been the pastoral letter, “A Flourishing, Apostolic Church”, written by our own Bishop Malesic in early 2025⁴. His message to the entire diocese offered a rich summary of both his personal and pastoral insights upon the need of each individual and parish to have prayer, worship, and service at the center of our faith participation. I was immediately grateful and encouraged when reading it. In addition to offering many insights that were applicable to those of various generations and backgrounds, he identified suggestions that were achievable for those seeking deeper faith development.

Our Bishop addressed various populations of our diocesan faithful as to how he would like to see their involvement deepen so as to affect the hearts of individuals, our parish communities, and the diocesan family. I encourage you to read it if you have not and hope you will find that it has a wide application to a great number of Catholics, whether they attend daily Mass or only a few times annually. With the purpose of bringing further application of our Bishop’s letter here to Holy Family in the years ahead, I have entered into conversation with our parish staff, our parish council, and members of the strategic envisioning committee as well, to discuss ways of accomplishing this.

First Steps

² Address to the Catholic Bishops of Latin America, 1983 - St. John Paul II

³ Inauguration Homily of his Pontificate, 5, 1978 - St. John Paul II

⁴ For a copy of this document, please visit our diocesan website, www.dioceseofcleveland.org, or contact the parish office.

The Church has designed a parish as a “school of holiness” where the Christian way of life can be witnessed and practiced. Centered around the life of the Trinity, God’s Word, and the sacramental life, a parish desires to build up all its efforts and activities as an offering back to God. The four values that have been identified previously - A Welcoming Home, Encountering Jesus Christ, Eucharistic Worship, and Inspiring Saints - are all well-rooted in what the Church envisions a parish and the activity of its members to be about. The action steps we will soon engage in will be intentional efforts to build up the Kingdom of God here locally, fostering a deeper friendship with God for all those who are seeking it.

In regard to the goals and specific efforts that will help to accomplish this, over 20 pastoral goals have been identified over this last year’s discernment process, and these are all reflected within the four values shared earlier. I have adopted a three-year timeline for us as a parish in which to pursue this growth and to petition God for His blessings. This allows a substantial amount of time to seek progress in multiple areas, acknowledging that the transformation of hearts and habits takes time and accompaniment.

I humbly acknowledge that as we embark into new efforts within our parish community and beyond, we also should consistently watch for the Holy Spirit to speak and offer guidance. As a means to continually listen to the Spirit and receive counsel, I will establish a parish group that will offer prayer, petition, and fasting throughout the course of this strategic effort. I believe that all efforts - spiritual and practical - are most successful when we petition the Lord and even offer some sacrifice that acknowledges that it is, in the end, His blessings and graces that build up all of creation. The parish staff and I, along with members of the strategic envisioning team, will have ongoing communication with this group as a part of our efforts to have effective collaboration and communication over the course of this campaign.

Launching this strategic plan will require an effective communication of its steps and reasons, offering sufficient commentary on its stages and developments. To accomplish this, members of the strategic envisioning team along with myself will be hosting several larger gatherings in the months ahead for parishioners to learn more on the specific goals of this plan, to join in group discussion, and to be invited into some level of participation going forward. There will also be efforts to update the wider parish as to the activities associated with this strategic effort, as well as the sharing of graces so that we may celebrate them, or any substantial changes that may arise and need to be addressed. My current plan is to write to the parish at various intervals over the next three years and to host any larger gathering necessary for the distribution of information.

Encouragement in Moving Forward

My final words regarding the start of this strategic vision and plan is to now call forth all of our parishioners to actively engage in these efforts. As we can see already within Holy Family, there is a host and variety of gifts, desires, experiences, and hopes. I ask that as you participate and engage more deeply in the months ahead, that we have a spirit of anticipation and encouragement. How many times have we seen that the Lord is not outdone in generosity?

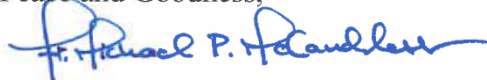
In my hope to ignite some tangible purpose and reason for you to engage in this strategic process, I encourage you to enter into a short spiritual exercise:

- Can you identify in your own life, a family member's life, or a colleague's life, where there could be more trust and joy in our daily encounters?
- Has there been a recent death where Christ's words of the resurrection and comfort to mourners could have brought more trust and joy?
- A sickness or suffering where Christ's moments of healing, or words of accompaniment, could bring more trust and joy?
- Someone who struggles with loneliness or unforgiveness that, if Jesus' words and the presence of the community were available, there could be more trust and joy?
- A child or grandchild, or other relative, that lives life away from the sacraments or the parish community, that would receive more trust and joy if they were invited back?
- Can you name another situation, maybe within your own family, that would benefit from a courageous effort to bring Jesus Christ and His Gospel more urgently than before, despite felt discomfort or resistance?

These moments of human incompleteness are the very moments Christ came incarnationally to touch and redeem; these moments are great motivations for us to enter into new efforts, with a renewed purpose, to increase the participation we have with Jesus Christ and His Church as a parish community. I am grateful that so many wonderful efforts already exist within our parish that seek these outcomes. May we now continue, supported with the words of our bishop and alongside other parish communities throughout the diocese, in this effort to seek more of the fruits He desires to give us.

In closing, I believe the words of St. Paul assuring the Church at Caesarea Philippi are very fitting: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6)." I encourage all of us to keep a faithful and anticipating disposition of heart in the time ahead. May the Lord, whom I trust has inspired a more zealous response from His Church in these days, bless those who respond to His call.

Peace and Goodness,



Fr. Michael P. McCandless
Pastor, Holy Family Parish