June 23rd, 2018

Dear Parishioners of Holy Family,

I wanted to keep you informed on what will be happening in the next weeks as we move into this transitional time. Beginning July 11th I will be the pastor of Holy Family. This will be a challenging time for you as a community. Mass will no longer be Sunday at 10 AM. I would like to be with you during this time as much as I can, and that time will not be possible. Thus, we will have Mass Saturday Evening at 6:30 PM. This will allow me to spend time with you after Mass and have the chance to get to know you. We will be preparing for this new reality. World-wide and in many places the Catholic Church is seeing declining numbers of Mass attendance. In many places in our Diocese the demographics have changed which has taken a toll on numbers of people attending regular Mass. The numbers of priests have also substantially dropped. Despite all this, for many years the Church has kept open most parishes. We have reached a point where we need to make changes not only in Mass schedules but in the arrangement of clusters and this entails closing some parishes and merging others. We simply cannot keep everything open for the sake of convenience. We need to remember the mission of the Church is to share Jesus Christ with the world. This mission takes precedence over and above simply maintaining buildings and structures. Sometimes that means we have to allow for changed realities. Holy Family is in an area that was once populated with farm families and it was a growing area. That has not been the case for quite some time, but you have faithfully kept the church going these many years. Back into 2012 the Diocese made the decision to undertake a 5-year strategic plan that would propose and make changes in the way the Diocese was organized on the parish level. This plan has largely been carried out, but until now has not been fulfilled in our area. I know for many of you this plan was not favorable. It called for the closure of Holy Family. This, I know, is a bitter pill to swallow. It is to your credit that you have kept the parish open and that you even of late, have sought ways to keep the parish going. It shows you are passionate about your parish and the community of faith that it represents. At this time, we are being asked to surrender to God’s plan which is made known to us through our superiors, in this case the Bishop and his advisors as well as all the members of the strategic planning committee. They have made it clear that now is the time to enact this plan. That means we will no longer be having a regular Mass at Holy Family after Labor Day weekend. We will be having a final Mass at the parish sometime around then; the last regular weekend Mass will be September 1st. From July 14th through September 1st we will have a Saturday evening Mass at 6:30 PM.

As long as we still have possession of the Church and it is a fit place for Mass I will be happy to do funerals or other sacraments there if appropriate. The cemetery must be maintained even after the parish closes. This will be the responsibility of Our Lady of Fatima (OLF) in Garrison who will also receive the parish assets and liabilities when Holy Family is Merged into Our Lady of Fatima. The parish hall and retreat center will also be under the care of OLF. I am hopeful that we can come up with some long-term solutions of how to care for the facilities, but that may entail selling some or all of the buildings at some point.

There has been a long history of strong community at Holy Family, now we are being asked to be open to God’s plan for us. What is he asking us to do? How are we to continue the mission of Christ in our area? The door has been closed regarding keeping the parish open, that is not an option now. But for each of you as individuals the Lord is still inviting you to continue practicing and participating in the community of faith. The Church goes beyond parish boundaries, you are still members of the body of Christ although you may feel your place is being pulled out from under you. You will need to begin practicing your faith in a different location. In many ways this will feel like a death in the family and it will take time to grieve and mourn what you are losing. You may struggle to find a new parish that feels like home. It probably will not be easy, but I invite you to pray about it, and begin thinking about where you will now attend. Consider the Holy Family when they left Nazareth for Bethlehem and then to Egypt and back to Nazareth. Ironically you in a sense are sharing their fate. Trust that just as God provided for them, he will provide for you too.

Nobody (the Diocese or myself) is telling you where you are to attend Mass, but we hope you will continue practicing your Catholic faith. It would be easy to simply stop going at this point, nothing would give greater pleasure to the evil one. Understandably you may be upset with this change. You may even feel abandoned by the Diocese and the Church. These feelings may be present, and must be acknowledged, but it is important to remember we are here not simply to maintain buildings, but to bring Christ to the people of the world.

We must be aware of how we are doing regarding this mission. It’s not just about numbers… but at times numbers do dictate part of what we are able to do. Numbers of people attending, numbers of people who are entering the Church and joining it, numbers of priestly vocations, especially those coming from individual parishes. The demographic numbers of a region… are people coming into the area or moving away and what ages are they? All these play a factor on what is the reality of our situation.

Ultimately, as a church we must be turned outward not only inward. We can no longer simply maintain what we had in the past, we must become a community that actively reaches out and invites people to encounter Christ. Part of that is becoming aware of how people, especially new people, are welcome and how well we are evangelizing. We can never change the message or water down the gospel, but we must seek to reveal why and how the gospel has changed our life. My hope is that over these next weeks we can continue the process that has already been happening with Fr. David. It may be that many will not enjoy the 6:30 Sat. Mass time. Frankly it’s not my favorite either, but it is what can work. I want to be with you as we go through this together. I hope those who feel strongly tied to the parish are able to process these changes together. I understand, that for many of you this may not be your preferred time but this is when I can be with you. You are not alone in these transitions. The other parishes in our area are being affected as well, but of course each parishes experience is unique, and being closed is a great challenge.

I appeal to you, accept this decision gracefully. It will entail grieving and mourning and a time of trying to understand where we go from here. Any efforts to continue to keep Holy Family open will only exacerbate the experience and keep the wound open and raw.

May God guide us during this difficult process and help us find the path forward both as a community and as individuals. Know that I have been and will continue to pray for you as we journey together.

In Christ,

-Fr. Eli Gieske