

# St. John Paul II Parish

## Our Challenge and our Future A Joint Presentation of the Parish Council, Parish Finance Council, and Parish Trustees

Approximately eight years ago the Diocese decided to merge the parishes of St. Leo the Great and St. Cecilia into a new parish. There were reasons for this and a number of those reasons were economic.

At the time, weekly collections of both parishes totaled approximately \$10,000 on a combined basis, which strained the ability of each to meet responsibilities. In addition, there was accumulated debt and maintenance issues to be considered and it was the decision of the Diocese to join the parishes hoping that, with combined resources, there would be a better opportunity to address these concerns. The Diocese agreed that both church buildings would remain open and that the potential sale of parish assets could address the financial needs and that the increased level of collections would be sufficient. This strategy worked for a time.

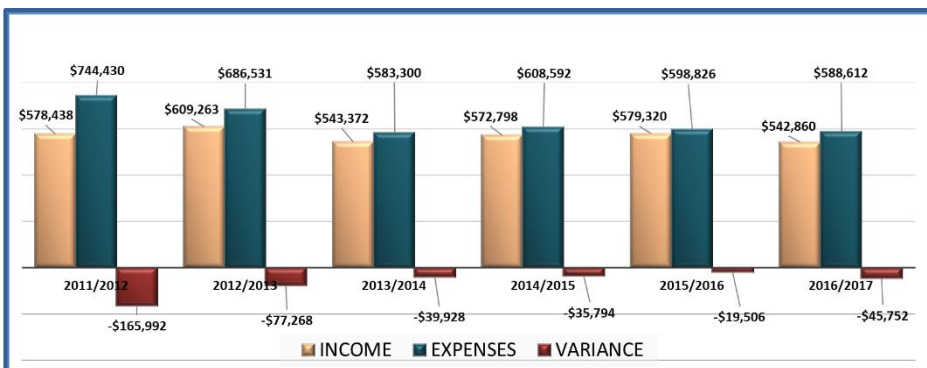
However, other forces began to act upon us. Negative national and regional economic forces worked against us while demographic changes to our parish and community began to exert themselves. This has been a battle that Fr. Sisco has waged for his entire pastorate. It has worn him out with worry and kept him up many nights. We have all heard Fr. Sisco speak of this at Mass and seen it published in the bulletin that we needed over \$7,500 weekly in collections to meet our expenses, but, even with that, revenue continued to fall and last year our debt began to increase.

The Diocese has taken note of this and recently summoned Father and Bruce Guindon to discuss the matter. Msg. Bastia, Vicar of Planning & Financial Services, indicated that the Diocese did not want to find itself, or the Parish, back in serious debt. As a result, the Diocese has requested a plan from the parish to address our current debt amounting to \$92,419 or it could find itself in the position of having the Diocese determining the parish's future for us.

Father brought the Parish Council, the Finance Council, Trustees, and School Board together to discuss this turn of events and to find a way, if possible, to avoid it. Father has left it to us to assess our situation and to make our recommendations. He understands that the parishioners are the ones who will have to live with its decision long after he has been moved on to another parish. Right now, our future is in our hands.

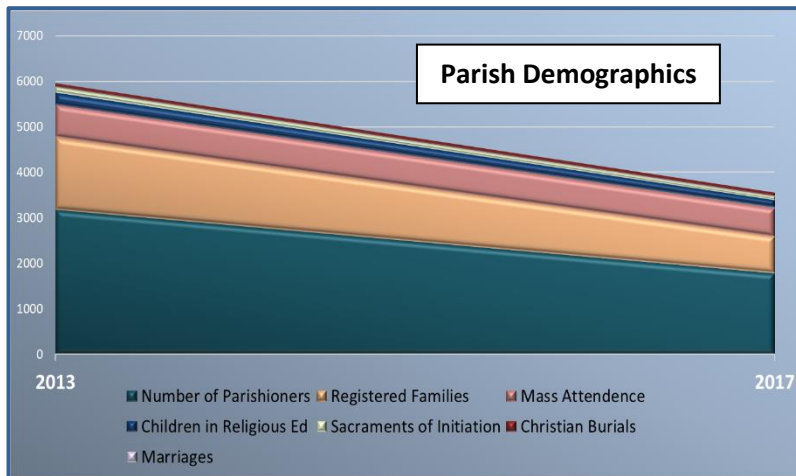
As a parish, we actually have two challenges before us: First – How to respond to the diocese by paying down our current debt. Second – How to sustain ourselves into the future.

In order to respond to these dual challenges, we all need to understand what our current fiscal situation is. Since the merger, parishioners have demonstrated great generosity and Father and his staff worked very hard to keep operating expenses as low as possible. Parishioners have responded positively by increased giving. Father has let staff go. We have sold assets to get rid of old debt. Over and over again we all have stepped up and given what we can. Essentially, we have been in survival mode and things were looking pretty good - - - until last year when our operating income decreased and our debt increased as a result.



The reasons for this slide into debt are many. The easiest explanation is that our total budget collections – *cash in the basket* – have, after a few years of modest increases, decreased substantially last year. Another reason is simply that we lose more parishioners than we gain. We sustain parishioner losses of approximately 100 persons a year but we gain only about 24 registrations. Assuming a very modest \$5.00 a week in

contributions by these lost parishioners, that is a revenue loss of about \$20,000.00 a year. Our operating income is in decline because we simply have not been able to sustain the numbers of active, contributing parishioners.



Parish Demographics	2013	2017
Number of Parishioners	3175	1779
Registered Families	1597	803
Mass Attendance	720	643
Children in Religious Ed	258	172
Sacraments of Initiation	117	83
Christian Burials	82	70
Marriages	7	6

Every indicator of a vibrant, financially stable, faith community and parish shows a downward trend. Beyond the decrease in the number of parishioners and registered families, Mass attendance has fallen, the numbers of children in Religious Education declined as did participation in all the Sacraments.

It would be too easy – and a mistake – to look just to ourselves to ask what we could do better or what we could do more of to turn this trend around. In reality, from 2000 to 2010 there has been a 15% decrease in Catholics across the State while there has been a 75% increase in persons who say that they have no religion. To make matters worse, only 38% of Catholics go to Mass once a week which means that 62% of those who still call themselves Catholic are not even in the pews when the collection basket is passed. Pawtucket is not immune to this downward trend and our Parish demographics reflect this.

Larger economic factors also have to be considered. Our neighborhoods were built and sustained by generations of parishioners who were long-term single-family home owners or who lived in multi-generational, multi-family apartment houses where expenses were shared between generations. Today, 54.2% of single family homes have been sold since 2000 and a full 90.1% of renters have moved into Pawtucket. 56% of the population are renters and demographics show that this is a more transient population not likely to identify with a local parish. To this, housing data indicates that local mortgage holders and renters are paying more of their income just to secure and sustain their housing. In the 02861 area, 5% of mortgage holders and 46% of renters pay more than the national average income-toward-housing standard. Even more sobering, 19.9% of those living in Pawtucket live below the Federal Poverty Line and some 27% of those living in Pawtucket receive some form of Public Assistance. Our community’s demographics demonstrates that this is not a population that would be in a position to sustain the parish in the long-term.

Our conclusion, based on downward collections, considering outside social and economic factors, and confirmed by declining parish demographics, the Councils and Trustees do not anticipate sufficient cash flow to cover the debts owed to the diocese and concedes that we will not meet the expenses for FY18 and successive years without asking more and more from those who have already given so much while having less and less to give.

Our recommendation to Father Sisco is that the Parish should consolidate its assets and resources so that our operating income can cover the operating expenses of the parish now and sustainably into the future. In making this recommendation, we had to consider what the essential mission of the Parish was and how to achieve it using the assets and resources it has. In this, we had to consider not only where and how we worship, but our obligation to educate our youth and build our community through access to appropriate facilities supported by adequate funding. With all of this and much more in mind, the Councils and Trustees have recommended that St. Leo’s Church Building be leased or sold.

The Councils and Trustees know that this recommendation hurts and please know that it hurts us as well. Many of us were parishioners of St. Leo’s. Some of us were baptized here or made our First Communion or Confirmation here. A number of us were married here and our children received their Sacraments here. More than a few of us have prayed for our dead here. St. Leo’s has been central to our past and will always remain in our hearts. If need be, we will always keep a part of it enshrined in our worship and fellowship. Still, it is unfair and unwise of us to just assume that we can expect more and more from fewer and fewer of our parents, our brothers and sisters, and from our children at the risk that the entire Parish will not be able to sustain itself.

Strengthened by our faith in God and relying on the intercession of our patron, St. John Paul II, we continue to pray for guidance and for strength to meet the difficult times to come. As St John Paul told us, “Have no fear of moving into the unknown. Simply step out fearlessly knowing that I am with you therefore no harm can befall you; all is very, very well. Do this in complete faith and confidence.”

*\*[Resources Referenced: Neighborhood Scout; Pew Forum; Town Charts; and Parish Records]*