

PASTORAL LETTER: Saying Goodbye

June 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I have written six pastoral letters over the eighteen years I have been privileged to serve as your pastor. This final one is the most personal and certainly most difficult, for in it I want to address a sad reality looming: soon I will no longer be your pastor and must move out of the parish.

I have spent almost half of my priesthood as your pastor. I arrived in 2002, just months before my 50th birthday; I leave here just shy of my 67th birthday. During that time, I have watched many of your children grow from grade school kids to married parents. I've buried people whom not only you loved, but I as well. I have been privileged to baptize your children, offer Reconciliation, give First Communion to our little ones, administer the Sacraments of Initiation, work with wonderful volunteers and committees, teach and protect your children, listen to your heartbreaks and offer advice if desired, mentor a native son as he prepared for priesthood, anoint the sick, and come to the bedsides of those passing over to New Life. These moments I cherish; these are the things that make a priest want to get out of bed in the morning.

Sadly, one of my dreams never materialized, and is a part of why I was told I would be moving on. I really thought that if we embraced Tithing we could knock down our debt, even while building the gym. Obviously, for various reasons, it did not happen. However, with the work of the SPAT team helping make the school self-sustaining, parish resources will very soon be able to go towards not only paying Archdiocesan bills, but also paying down debt. Please support your new pastor and our excellent business manager as they wrestle with this situation.

My heart is full of memories, happy and sad. I was blessed to celebrate both my silver jubilee and my 40th anniversary of ordination at St. Martha's. My brother Mike and his wife Pat were married here. I've had several family gatherings at the rectory, especially at Christmas. Both of my parents took ill and died during my time here, and I shall never forget your kindnesses to me and my family during those difficult times. Last summer, as I battled cancer, your prayers, cards and good wishes sustained me through treatment and its aftermath. I am truly both the patriarch of a large and loving human family, and also the "father" of a larger and loving church family.

The first role continues. The second soon ends --- or maybe, evolves! Maybe I can be a "grandfather" figure as I leave St. Martha's. Grandparents don't always live with the family, but the kids do see them quite often. So I hope it will be with my continuing relationship with you all. I need to stay out of the way for your new pastor, but you and I can certainly stay in touch by phone, e-mail or snail mail! I'd welcome visits; I'll only be about 25 minutes away at Immaculate Conception in Jenkintown.

Knowing I could never love another "spouse" as I love this parish, and feeling the toll of bad knees, anxiety and whatever the cancer took out of me, I asked for

medical early retirement and Archbishop Perez granted it to me. I still intend to remain as active as I can, maybe getting into other pursuits such as teaching college and writing, as well as helping my host parish and neighboring parishes if asked. I'm in the process of getting my first childrens' book, *Izzy the Christmas Owl*, published. I hope to teach in a local college. I'm sure not going to sit around and watch soaps all day!

One of the worst parts of this separation is that, as I begin to gather thoughts for this letter, the Corona virus is forcing us to stay away from each other. Thank God for social media (never thought I would say that) so that I can at least reach you via daily video blogs and live streamed Sunday Mass. Still, I miss the physical contact, the handshakes, back pats, hugs from little ones (and sometimes not so little ones), groans at my terrible jokes and smiling faces. In some ways, I felt separation anxiety already, even though I am still physically here. Now that the stay at home has been lifted, I am happy to get my "fix" of you all on Sundays. I hope I get the chance to physically say good bye somehow.

In some ways, leaving a parish is a "death" for a priest. The former things pass away. And yet, with every death comes New Life, and the ultimate things endure. When a loved one passes, we still have a relationship with them, though we will not see them for a while. We keep warm memories, pray for them, and love them still. We rejoice for them, for they have a new reality. Well, I don't expect to be dead soon, but I will be gone and you will not be physically as close to me as you are now. There will be some mourning on my part (perhaps on yours), but our Faith in Resurrection analogously gives us the way to cope. The relationship and care endure.

So, dear friends, I thank you for eighteen of the best years of my priesthood and life. I apologize for any wrong or slight or hurt I've caused any of you. I reassure you that you will always be in my prayers, and as close to me as you wish to be. Love and care for Fr. Andy and your new pastor as much as you did for me and do all you can to help the parish we all love.

I will not say farewell. I like what Germans say: "Auf wiedersehen"--- until we see each other again! Always remain, like St. Martha, friends of Jesus.

With a grateful heart,

Father Al

(Rev.) Alexander Masluk
Fifth Pastor of St. Martha Parish
(2002-2020)