

## **ASSEMBLY: SHARED VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF SMS**

**21 May 2018**

### **Pastor's Remarks**

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I. I am grateful for the presence of all of you this evening, a great sign of encouragement and hope to me. Not only are the members of the school family here, but also the broader parish family, which supports the school with one out of every four dollars of our common income.

II. Let me first of all put your minds at ease, at least to some degree: this meeting is not about the school closing. There is no such plan afoot; in fact, I recently had a wonderful conversation with Micah Sumner, who is the assistant superintendent for elementary schools in Philadelphia, and he was very supportive of what we are trying to do here. The rumor about closing has dogged me since I arrived here. It came back again when Mrs. Donofry was appointed principal; since she came from St. Anselm's, the rumor mill decided we were merging with our good neighbors to the north. Now, I am told they are adding an addition to a parish to the east, and so the rumor mongers have decided that all the northeast schools are merging and will go there. None of this is true.

III. At the same time, our school is 50. Is anyone else here, besides me, over fifty? If so, you know that turning fifty is a critical time. It is when you decide if you will take measures to help yourself spend more active years on this planet, or let yourself go and waste away, limping into an uncertain and unhealthy future. And so, I have invited you all here so we can be sure that our 50 year old will have a vibrant future.

IV. We can only do this if all of us are on the same page, share the same fire, and give it everything we can. So tonight, I want to remind you of the many blessings we have, address the challenges we face (and in doing so I think answer some of the questions and concerns parents have expressed over time), and focus us all on what we need to do to have a shared vision for the future.

## **BLESSINGS**

I. I never blow smoke. I am not a politician. I call a spade a spade and a joker a joker, sometimes shooting my own foot in the process. And so, what I tell you now comes not from a motivational book, nor a Hallmark card, but directly from my heart. Some of you have taken the time to talk with me and realize that I do have one.

II. I have been associated with seven parish schools over my 39 years as a priest. I have never loved a school or its children as much as I love St. Martha School. Were it to close it would leave a hole in my heart that I'm not sure I would be able to endure. I hope you realize what a wonderful principal and staff you have. I pray you do not take for granted the best teachers I have ever had the pleasure of watching ply their craft. And your kids? I have been to other parishes in the area for various purposes, and have seen kids from other parishes at functions such as Ryan's show. None of them measure up in any way to the students of St. Martha's School. They are funny, caring, and respectful. Oh, sometimes there is drama, and like all kids they need to be pushed, but they are simply nice children—wonderful reflections of their parents. You should be proud. I watch their teachers do so many extra things for them, and give special attention to the child having a bad day, and patiently lead them along the path of learning, and I see these beautiful creatures you have made get refined and polished and grow in so many ways. When the “business” part of running the school gets me down (and it does from time to time) I just go to where the children are, playing after lunch, or in the gym, and I am reenergized and more determined to do the best we can for them.

III. We also have generous parishioners who do not have children in the school; some never have. Their support of the parish allows the parish to continue to subsidize the school. Some of them, as well as people outside the school community, joined together to form a School Board of Limited Jurisdiction. We got our feet wet this year; next year promises to be a most productive and busy one for all the subcommittees.

IV. Finally, parents, we have you. Mrs. Donofry pointed out to me some time ago something I had not realized. Usually, a Home and School board is composed of “veteran” parents, parents of children in higher grades. Our current Home and School Board is dominated by families more recent to our school, wonderful, creative folks who did so much for the school this year. I thank God every day for the blessings He has given me over the last 16 years as pastor, and every day I mention the parish school.

### **CHALLENGES**

I. Every family has challenges. No family is perfect or free from conflict. Each family has its own hardships and struggles. Assistant Superintendent Sumner told me that many, many parish schools face the same challenges we do. We are not alone. We can overcome challenges the same way any family does: taking an honest look at what is and seeing what we need to do differently or better. I would like to address some of our local challenges now, and I hope, in doing so, I will address some of your concerns as they have been brought to me.

II. Catholic Education is expensive. We know that. This is one of the reasons you should press legislators to support School Choice, so that your tax dollars could be used to subsidize your own tuition! Allow me to mention some issues which arise from the costs of running the school.

III. I mentioned that the parish gives almost one of out every four dollars it has to subsidize the school and keep your tuition as low as possible. Every family does get, in effect, a scholarship for their children from the parish. However, no parish can keep the level of subsidy that we are contributing forever. And so, fees and fundraisers become very important to fiscal stability. Speaking of fundraisers, we are aware that when you get badgered with fundraisers seemingly every week, a “fundraiser fatigue” sets in. I have called a meeting for June 2 with every group in any way involved with fundraising, to try to make our fundraising more effective and less annoying. The Carnival and Auction remain our biggest fundraisers and I thank you for your support for and work at them.

IV. Then, there are the fees. Some folks have a problem with the \$75 lottery fee for non-participation in the twice-yearly lottery. This mandatory fundraiser raises about \$25,000 a year. The alternative is simply raising tuition \$150, but the idea of the lottery is that selling the tickets doesn't cost you a thing except time and effort. We are trying to keep tuition levels as low as we can.

V. The lunch fee was never meant to cover lunch. On the budget and finance report is an entry for "cafeteria income/loss." After stipends and taxes are paid the lunch monitors, there are still other "overhead" expenses, such as heat and lights and janitorial services. Whatever "profit" we make is eaten up by these things.

VI. Tuition collection is always a challenge with some families. Believe me, I know what a pile of bills looks like: there is a big one on the business manager's desk right now. However, there are some "bills" we have to pay on time—such as salaries and taxes and healthcare. Eventually we get to the utilities and other things, but we have to prioritize. When our parents do not make tuition as priority, there is a trickle-down effect that makes us take more resources from the parish at large, keeping us from paying off other bills. For this reason, we need to be firm about tuition. I do my best not to get involved in tuition matters, because, as a staff member recently told me, I am a marshmallow. We simply need tuition paid when it is due—all through the summer! Late fees are simply a way of applying pressure for parents to keep their end of the contract. I am grateful to the folks who are always on time; it makes a big difference. Maybe, parents, you might consider an automatic payment being taken out of your account monthly, like for some other bills (loans, etc.) We were exploring the use of credit cards for payment for families who are late. All these ideas are being floated around. Maybe you have others.

VII. There are many ways you can help yourself reduce your tuition. We had a meeting in January when these opportunities were presented, and some folks did take advantage and helped their own cause! Your tuition can be reduced by applying for the Children's Scholarship Fund of Philadelphia, receiving a FACTS

scholarship, by a financial grant received for successfully referring our school to a new family, by using Scrip, and by receiving the Good Steward Rate, available to families who practice their faith.

VIII. Speaking of tuition and registrations, as of last week, we only have 135 re-registered for next year. Of these, 11 are new students. We budgeted for and expect about 210 students; however, we need to be firm in our numbers fairly quickly! If you are delaying re-registering, now is the time to “git ‘er done.” Postponing just makes your monthly tuition rate higher, the longer you delay. Please help us plan for the future.

### **OUR SHARED VISION LOOKING FORWARD**

I. I came here a rather young man; I was 49 years old, with better knees, darker hair, better eyesight, lower blood pressure and much less stress. I am now approaching 65, and while physically I am more limited, the passion I have for this parish and its school burns ever brighter in my heart. However, I have come to the humbling realization that I cannot do what needs to be done solely on the strength of my will. I would like to live beyond 65, and enjoy my family for years and years to come. If things stay just as they are, I will not, and the school will enter its 50’s in questionable shape. I need every person in this church, and indeed, every member of the parish family, to commit to three things as we face a future together: *Practice, Priorities and Passion.*

II. *Practice*, of course, means the practice of Faith. The primary reason St. Martha School or any Catholic School exists is to teach Catholic students how to be strong practicing Catholics and help its non-Catholic students to walk in faith. While we prepare them with the subjects which will help them be successful in this life, our focus is on the next life, eternal, with God. The Third Commandment of God (not of Father Al) commands us to keep the Sabbath. All Christians have a moral obligation to attend church weekly; our Catholic Church is wise to emphasize the necessity of doing so by reminding us that willfully skipping Sunday Mass is serious sin. As you have heard me say before, it all comes down to this: if God is not Number One, something or someone else is.

III. I am so proud and edified when I see families come together to Mass each week, as so many families do. I am especially proud of the families who have little ones, and who still bring them all to Mass. I know it is a struggle, but they are teaching their kids that this church is their Father's house and their house as well. I remind you that at the 10:00 Mass, little ones can attend a Liturgy of the Word geared to their level, feeding them God's Word with a Children's Bible while the adults are fed with the usual lectionary (and giving mom and dad a few moment's peace). It is no accident that families who attend Mass together weekly are the most involved not only in school events but parish activities. And so, since my job is to help save souls, I would fail in my responsibilities before God if I did not urge and even nag people about attending Sunday Mass – so do not expect me to stop doing so. It's not my rule—it is God's. With a Vigil Saturday evening, and three Masses on Sunday, everyone can find a time to come to Mass. If you cannot, you had better take a look at your schedule—it is too filled with things if there is no time for God. It mystifies me why parents would spiritually starve their children, and lead them down a path of estrangement from God. When they need God later in life, they will not be able to find Him—though He never leaves us, we need to be taught as children how to come to Him.

IV. And so I ask every family to bring their children to Mass Sunday. I remind those receiving Good Steward tuition, which is the majority of our school families, that Mass attendance and support are conditions of receiving this good rate. Going forward, we simply have to address this major issue and live our lives as Catholics are called to. The occasional problem may arise: illness, emergencies, and so forth, but “I had a game” or “we had to leave early to go somewhere” are never excuses from giving God one of the 164 hours He gives us each week. Practice your faith.

V. I also offer to you that *Priorities* have to also be part of our Shared Vision for the Future. Making Sunday Mass is a sign of good priorities; it means God is Number One. So are attending all Home and School meetings, getting involved in the parish and school, paying that tuition bill when it is due, being sure the

children have done their homework, get enough rest, and are prepared for the school day. To what we hold as a priority we devote our energies.

VI. Now, if there were an announcement tomorrow that SMS might close, the troops would rally. All of a sudden, with real danger imminent, the number one priority would be to do what was necessary to avoid this disaster! Well, the time to make sure priorities are straight is not at some future apocalyptic time which would probably be too late for action, but NOW! If our parish school is a priority, give it the energy it deserves! Let's only do things which will strengthen and empower our school to serve our children for many years to come. In doing this, we help our children realize how important good priorities are. We help them, when they feel torn apart and drawn in too many directions by so many things that are attractive, to focus on what is important and focus their energies on those things. It's a good life lesson—one I know I am still learning!

VII. Finally, I spoke at a Home and School meeting this year about the need for *Passion*. Passion for this school flows through my veins; I hope I have conveyed to you this evening some of how I feel about SMS. If you cut me, I bleed not only red, but white. To insure a future full of promise, we all---administrators, boards, parents, students, teachers, families, alumni, parishioners and friends of SMS need to be fired up with passion. That passion must show itself in a willingness to recruit families and friends, to share what you love about our school with others. That passion should (and does) show itself on social media, when our children's accomplishments, or simply special events in which they partake, are shared and liked and given good comments. Let me tell you from my own sad experience, we have to be careful in our use of social media. An awkward attempt by me on Facebook to flush out the parents of young hooligans from another neighborhood who trashed parish property and cursed me and even God last summer simply turned into a firestorm. I have been careful since then only to post things which are positive and funny---and I always make it a point to praise the good things I see posted about our school---or I post them myself!

VIII. Passion shows itself when alumni respond to financial appeals, and gather for social events and school activities, and come forth to volunteer to set up an Alumni Committee! We need all our alumni to come together in support of the school. Very few answered a mailed appeal, but a phone-a-thon was very successful; we need to build upon that! Passion shows itself as presence, support for school programs, volunteering when needed, but most of all word-of-mouth sharing of the good news of what we have at our wonderful school.

## CONCLUSION

I. So, friends, I pray you are aware of the many **blessings** God has given us in giving us the privilege of having St. Martha Catholic School. I hope I have been able to let you see into my heart and soul and taste the deep love I have for the school and our children. I tried to address challenges and issues which many of you have; I hope I have. Most of all, I hope you all realize that now is the time for us to stop floating along like we always have, because it will not work that way for long. I beg you to work together in embracing **Practice** of the Faith (for if we are faithful to God, we know He will bless our efforts), in making the health and future of St. Martha School a true **priority** in your lives, and in firing up in your heart the fire of **Passion** for the school which burns in this tired old heart.

II. No one of us can do this alone; I certainly can't, as I have fewer years ahead of me than behind me. But, together, we must share the same vision if we are to have a glorious future. I will welcome any constructive questions or ideas in a moment, or, if you want to think and dream a few days, feel free to contact me later. But in the meantime, I plead with you to help us meet our challenges and celebrate our blessing with Practice, Priorities and Passion.

III. We have two slogans we use for our school in advertising. One is favored by Mrs. Donofry: “St. Martha School, the Little School with a Big Heart”. I am partial to the other one: “Faith in our Students, Confidence in our Future.” You can see both of these fleshed out in the treasure we call our parish school. Together, we will have a great future, if we all face the same way and pull together. God bless you, and like St. Martha, may we always be friends of Jesus.