PASTOR’S OPEN LETTER TO PARISHIONERS
“GO AND REPAIR MY CHURCH...”
April 15, 2013

In my previous letter regarding Pope Francis I mentioned a lovely story of St. Francis of Assisi who used to pray in the abandoned church of San Damiano near Assisi. The story goes that it was there that St. Francis heard a voice coming from the cross, “Francis, go and repair my church!” I mentioned on how much “repairing” Pope Francis and all of us have ahead, to repair and fix spiritually speaking God’s Church.

The first priority of every good shepherd is the pastoral care and the spiritual welfare of the people. It is not about fundraising, parking lot repairs, paying debts, etc. The first priority is always the hearts and souls of our sisters and brothers.

But we still need a physical and a structural place – the church – where we meet and celebrate God’s love and mercy flowing freely through the sacramental life of the Church. We also have to physically repair the church since it is God’s house and our spiritual home.

Sense of belonging...
Since my arrival here I tried my best to instill in you a very simple concept: this church and parish does not belong to me but it belongs to you! All of us form this family of faith. The purpose of the many ministries started was to develop our mission as Catholic Christians, build up our parish and local community. In other words, I want you to believe and feel deep within you that yes, this is my church, this is my parish! For example, the intent of the pictorial parish directory was to help us know one another. The directory helps us connect names with faces. It was meant to bring us closer together! Once we have a sense of belonging, we may go and celebrate Eucharist to other churches giving certain circumstances, but my parish is Our Lady of Mt. Carmel! The sense of belonging is important because while we acknowledge that the Church in general is, of course, much larger than our little parish, there is a place I can call my spiritual home, just like our physical homes. This is my parish, as simple and small but homie as it may be but it is mine and its future depends on me and my parish community. I support it, I love it, through thick and thin and I’m going to build this community up it doesn’t matter who the pastor is. In the end, pastors come and go but you, as parishioners, remain. It is true that a pastor can shape and direct the “boat” in a certain direction but in the end the pastor cannot do it by himself. That’s where parishioners’ role comes in especially if all of us feel and have that sense of belonging.

Of physical repairs...
Our church began as a barn and the original structure is as old as the Lang dairy farm which was renovated and transformed into this church around 1947. In 1972 the original foundation was extended and the current redwood structure was built.
Since December 2009 we have not assumed any new loans however the parish has completed numerous maintenance and repair projects:

1. Early 2010: installed double-pane windows in the rectory and painted the interior of the rectory;
2. Ongoing project: new landscape around the church and parking lot;
3. 2010-2012: removed trees damaging the parking lot and the church’s foundation;
4. June 2012: resurfaced the parking lot and repaired drainage system;
5. November 2012: painted the exterior of the church and all facilities;
6. Early 2013: installed two sliding doors in the parish hall and building a new patio adjacent to the parish hall – courtesy of a very generous donor.

Despite the ongoing attention to maintenance and repairs there are two additional large scale projects. The first project is repairing the floor especially on the right side of the church. Even though we removed the Chinese Elm, the tree was inches away from the church’s foundation and the roots severely damaged the floor and foundation. The second major project is replacing the roof of the church and the parish hall. We made several repairs but we are told that both will need to be replaced within another year.

Installing a new roof and fixing the floor of the church are major projects. We have some options:

1. Just continue the small repairs and patch jobs. Postpone major spending until it is absolutely necessary;
2. Raise funds and replace the roof and floor as soon as we have the finances;
3. The roof and floor are the most sizable portion of any renovation therefore replacing the roof and floor should be completed along with a renovation of the whole church.

**Of Church Renovation …**

I tend to believe – but I am waiting for your response and suggestions – that doing the third option is probably the best in a long run. It will also be a little more expensive too since the county will not give us the permit to extend the church and renovate it without bringing the building up to code; for example, I’m sure one of the requirements is to make our restrooms handicap accessible.

Currently our seating capacity in the church is barely 150 including the choir pews. Yesterday we celebrated First Communion and we had about 100 people waiting outside the church since we did not even have standing room left in the Church. The same happened last Easter with all Masses and Christmas as well. The church is also packed when we have events, such as hosting retreats for confirmation students or other major liturgical celebrations.

In the past there were plans to build a new church but somehow they did not materialize. Rather than building a new church I believe that we can easily renovate the church and add at least 5 pews on each side so that 80-100 people may be seated. A cost effective expansion would be ideal. If there is an interest it is possible to explore the potential for expanding the church on the
northern side and installing a bell tower just like the 1952 photo shows. Thus, the current altar will be situated on the northern side and the entire church will be reconfigured. We can also install beautiful windows so that when you look at the altar you can see the beautiful Santa Lucia mountain range in the background. This would be the time to line up the whole building and extend the parish kitchen as well.

Such a project would be larger in scope than the 1972 remodeling. The entire project would cost much less than building a new church but it is a major, major project. The question some of you may ask: do we really need this? The answer is simple: it is obvious that we need a larger church today. We can use more space but you never remodel or build a new church only for the present congregation! You always build for the next generation! When Carmel Mission was built some thought they did not need such a large building but, once again, you always build a church looking for the next generation and, in fact, multiple generations!

Sweet Dreams or Reality?
Obviously, one of the first things coming to mind is, how are we going to pay for all this? We are in debt, are we not? Yes, currently our debt is: $353,965.70. But we are going to pay towards the debt slowly and surely, just like the way we did for the past three years. Since my arrival here (December 1, 2009) our parish paid $332,370.26 towards the debt!

We can use this year Annual Ministry Appeal (AMA) to raise funds towards this project. By the way, we started AMA last Sunday and there are envelopes in the pews for this purpose. If we want to really renovate the church then we need the help of everyone in the parish. Each household has to embrace the vision and commit to making regular financial contributions for both maintaining the parish and for any planned renovation. We can also ask major donors and local companies to sponsor and have other fundraising events.

One thing I will not do is to borrow additional money from the Diocese. We will not start any project until we know that we have the financial means.

I do believe that renovating, improving and extending the church is possible. It is possible if we have that sense of belonging and are concerned for the future of our church and parish family. Together we can make it happen if we believe that this is not a dream but instead a reality and I am part of it!

I can barely wait for your suggestions and comments. Till then, I will focus once again on the pastoral and spiritual welfare of our parish family.

May the Lord bless and guide us. May the Holy Spirit enlighten us to do what is best for God and God’s people. May Our Lady of Mt. Carmel walk along with us and protect us.