

Dear Saint Bernard Parishioners,

I am writing to apprise you about an important journey we, Saint Bernard and Christ King parishioners, will soon undertake to strengthen the Catholic Church's Gospel mission in our area.

As we embark, I want to direct us to the Catholic Church's core responsibilities: worship God, evangelize, and serve the poor. At every stage of the Church's history, at its best, we'll find Catholics undertaking these responsibilities well. Our two parishes are now being challenged to accomplish these goals much more effectively.

### **Catholic Presence in Wauwatosa and the Saint Bernard Landscape**

As Milwaukee's population grew westward, Saint Bernard Parish was established in 1911. While the Catholic population increased, five Wauwatosa parishes and six parishes in nearby communities were established. These parishes were full and expanding until the 1970s when sacramental practice started to decline and people started having fewer children. As a group, Wauwatosa area parishes have been operating far below their intended capacity for decades.

You have charitably understood this dynamic. When I arrived at Saint Bernard nearly nine years ago as the first pastor between Saint Bernard and Christ King, I often heard from you that we would be stronger as one parish rather than two. Listening to your comments, I took time—nine years—to carefully understand our parishes' past and future potential.

However, by early 2022, we needed to acknowledge just how many components of Saint Bernard's campus required replacement. Almost at once, years of delayed and temporary repairs were failing in practically every area. The 2022 air conditioner breakdown was merely an exclamation point on a list of overdue needs. Our property needed an investment of \$5 million over 4 years. This included paying the \$450,000 debt from our *previous* renovations nearly twenty-five years ago.

Saint Bernard was scheduled to participate in the Archdiocesan Love One Another Capital Appeal in early 2023, a perfect opportunity to address parish needs. From January to June 2023, an exhaustive effort was undertaken to encourage everyone to participate. You heard me emphasize the need for everyone's response. Our minimum need was \$2.5 million for the first series of repairs.

Even though our appeal volunteers comprehensively communicated our situation, we received pledges of \$1.5 million, below our minimum target. You received updates in July and October, stating we continued falling behind between necessary repairs and our daily needs. Instead of offers of help, all I heard was that it was time to pursue alternatives to repairs.

The need to do something different truly hit home after Mass on a Tuesday night in December. I stood in a cold church after our boiler failed, one of several times that week. Had it not reignited, our building would have become uninhabitable in days. The repair firm warned us that we were years past borrowed time. The boiler is only one of those serious issues, each with a severe price tag. We do not have the cash even to begin these projects.

At this point, honesty also demands acknowledging that these issues have become an unhealthy burden on the spiritual gifts you offer as parishioners. A disproportionate amount of energy is being expended on building maintenance rather than the evangelical demands of Jesus Christ. Infrastructure should support our mission rather than our mission being to support infrastructure.

This may be difficult for you to hear—it is for me, too—but straightforwardly naming our challenges is the only way to effect healthy change.

### **Time to Decide**

After discernment and discussion with the leadership of Saint Bernard and Christ King, it is clear the moment to change our trajectory is now. It is time to create a robust, vibrant, centralized environment to foster worship and community. Here is the direction we will be taking.

We have asked the Archbishop to unite as one parish, and permission has been granted. Additionally, the Archbishop has approved our request to utilize one building rather than two. Our new parish will use the present Christ King location as our physical campus. The name Christ King will be used, as Christological titles are considered more inclusive than Marian or saintly titles when naming ecclesiastical entities.

We investigated numerous options regarding Saint Bernard's campus, including sharing our land and reconstructing a smaller chapel. All options left us with far more debt and little benefit. Eventually, we engaged with several developers who would purchase our land for a new purpose. We chose one developer to move forward with this plan.

The leadership of both parishes took extended time before making these requests. Given your awareness of the extensive nature of Saint Bernard's needs, we provided ample time for you to respond and for the Holy Spirit to clarify our direction.

If the transaction is completed, the sale proceeds leave our new parish with resources for mission purposes. Options may include investing in endowment funds for Catholic education and stabilizing the facilities of one campus. I also want to ensure appropriate recognition of Saint Bernard's historical stewardship will be on the new site.

This is a purposeful strategy to create a more substantial parish presence, with resources directed to people more than buildings. The combined energy will help us to be more faithful to the Church's responsibilities: worship God, evangelize, and serve the poor.

### **Timeline**

This plan will not be completed tomorrow. The developer will submit plans to the city for approval, which may take six to nine months. We will remain in our building during that time. If plans are approved, we can determine when to set moments to celebrate the good work of our past and pledge ourselves to a renewed future. I am informing you about this now so we have time to prepare for a strong transition.

### **What Is Needed from You?**

This will affect both Saint Bernard and Christ King parishioners. I cannot foresee how each person will feel. Initial reactions may include enthusiasm, relief, and some sadness. The building at Saint Bernard holds memories of your most important life moments and has served as your daily relationship with God in the Eucharist.

A particular word of appreciation is owed to those of you who sacrificed your time and resources when the parish needed you at any point, especially recently. And I am likewise grateful for those of you who have courageously told me you would accept changes that include one parish and one location. I know that was not easy to contemplate. Your love of the Church is not lost on me. As we move forward, we will need your continued graciousness.

Those who pledged to Love One Another will be contacted as our case will be modified. Currently, funds collected are being utilized to manage our debt, which is part of the original case.

Most importantly, everyone's continued support is essential. Rather than lessening, it must increase. We must operate strongly now and once we unite as one parish. The road ahead will always encourage us to find joy in making sacrifices for Jesus' Church.

I sincerely ask Saint Bernard and Christ King parishioners to undertake this transition humbly and optimistically. I am confident about our future. I challenge us to become larger and more robust than our two parishes within the next few years. I anticipate days when we can more effectively engage with secular culture and more confidently undertake the Church's core tasks as one parish. I am also excited about us making some great new friends.

### **The Road Ahead**

This journey will initially take a lot of work. As your pastor, I want you to know I will walk you through this as best I can. I will be struggling with you as well. This has been in my prayers constantly as I process the cycles of grief: sadness and hope in what's ahead.

Finally, please, *let's not take this opportunity for granted*. God placed us here and now to create something new and exciting. The Holy Spirit will guide us. I love going to Saint Bernard's roof and appreciating our presence in the community. Through our witness, I pray our impact will be more transformative in the following decades. I believe we will look back on this opportunity with pride because we made it occur for the good of the Church and welcomed more people into the rich life of Christian discipleship.

Once again, the work of the Church at its best is worshiping God, evangelizing, and serving the poor. These were our goals in the past and will be until we enjoy life forever in our true home, the heavenly Jerusalem, toward which we eagerly hasten.

See you at Mass,

Fr. Phillip