

Homily for First Sunday of Lent

Faith Forward Campaign

It was Saturday afternoon in early October. I was sitting in the Pastor's study at St. Andrew's on Block Island. The phone rang. It was a priest from the Personnel Board asking me to interview for associate at Immaculate Conception Parish in Cranston.

I put the phone down. I was crushed. I had been in administration for some fifteen years and there had been every indication that I would continue to do that. And, to be honest, Msgr. Cerrito had the reputation for being a very difficult pastor to work with. I was devastated.

But I made the call, came off the island and interviewed with Msgr. It was a good interview. He was very kind. But he was looking for a six-year commitment and I was looking for greener pastures. After prayer and reflection, I declined.

In November I returned to the mainland only to be cornered by Bishop Angell who told me to take this position. It would be temporary. He also told Msgr. that he shouldn't expect to have me for more than one or two years.

This year I celebrate my twenty-fifth anniversary of being here at Immaculate Conception. They have been 25 of the most challenging and loving years of my life. To be honest I feel in love with this parish...

and with all of you who are this parish. Trust me, I know that I am far from being as good as Msgr. Cerrito was. But I have leaned on the words he spoke to me when he retired”you’re right for the job.” I miss him dearly for I never made a decision without speaking with him. In the six years with him, I had learned to trust and love him as a father and as a guide. No one could know how close we became.

When I became pastor I had two concerns. The first was to do a good job. The second to work to insure the future for our parish.

The future is a challenge for a lot of parishes. I continually hear priests talk about their parishes and hear them say the best days are behind us. They are struggling to keep the ship afloat. I understood those feelings. When Holy Apostles was created Msgr. feared that our best years were behind us. I couldn’t accept that.

I believe and am convinced that the best years of our parish are ahead of us. I don’t doubt it for a minute. This is the reason that I forged ahead in order to build our new parish school. Taking my lead from the legacy of Msgr. Murray and Msgr. Cerrito and guided by the wisdom of many leaders within our parish, I worked diligently for this new school. I did it because I believed that the school offered us a vision for the future. The Book of Proverbs says “without vision the people are lost”. With expert advice and guidance I choose the vision of a new school.

I believe that our school is the gateway and incubator for our future. 68% of the children in the school are from our parish. They are the parishioners of the future whose character is being formed through faith. Because of this school, in a time when parishes are closing, losing people and/or merging, our school has brought about a spring-time of renewal in membership. In the last three years since the school has opened over 250 families have joined our parish. In the three years prior to the school only 100 had joined the parish.

This school has given us state of the art facilities that include a gym, a theatre for education, an abundance of classroom space, a renovated hall. And all these are being used by parish organizations and ministries.

The school is financially strong. The parents of our students not only cover the cost of education but also are paying the cost of the \$6.5 million bank loan. These parents have courageously assumed the responsibility for this extraordinary debt. And we have waiting lists in almost every grade.

But not everything went as planned. I know that I told you that the school would not need any parish support, but I had no crystal ball to predict that the bank, at the last minute, would reduce the loan for the school by \$1 million. I had no way of knowing that the real estate agent

was misguiding us in promising a quick sale of the old school and the realization of a \$2 Million profit to help defray the cost of this endeavor.

By borrowing monies from the diocese through the Inter-Parish loan fund, we were able to finish this project. The challenge before us now is to work to reduce and retire the money owed to the diocese. This would free up funds to allow us to create an even better future for our students and for our parish.

We believe that the old school will be sold in the near future. There are interested parties, but with the depressed real estate market, it will not bring in as much as we had hoped for. So to retire the full debt we also need to raise funds.

To that end we are launching a campaign called “Faith Forward.” It is our goal to raise \$1.7 Million to do the following: to assist in retiring part of the money owed to our sister parishes through the diocese, to pay for several pending capital projects for our Church building and to cover our contribution of \$100,000 to this year’s Catholic Charity Appeal. Because of this program there will be no Catholic Charity Appeal in our parish this year.

Over the next three months I will be reaching out to you, along with a small group of parishioners to ask your support. We won’t be coming to your home to visit, but will be holding receptions and

gatherings to share with you all the details of our plans. I ask...no I beg...your prayers and financial support to help us in the process.

In this Lenten Season when we are invited to open ourselves up to the generous love of God by sharing in our own generosity, I ask your support. I believe our best years are ahead of us. I believe that our future is bright. And I believe that by moving our Faith Forward we work to create a legacy for generations to come.