

DIVINE MERCY PARISH and
THE MISSION OF SAINT BERNADETTE
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Dear Friends,

Greetings in the Lord!

Last week after the annual State of the Parish Report, we had a Town Hall Meeting to discuss the status of The Mission of Saint Bernadette. About 30 people attended the meeting.

At the meeting, I presented various factors for us to consider: (1) our continued annual operational deficit, (2) the pending diocesan and parish chapter 11 settlement for past abuse of minors by clergy, religious, teachers, coaches, employees, volunteers, etc., (3) the average weekly Mass attendance, (4) the shortage of priests, and (5) the situation of parishes without a priest.

Though our annual operational deficit is much lower now that we no longer have to maintain the church of Saint Mary in Cleveland, rising fuel and other costs make it impossible for us not to continue to operate at a deficit each year. Moreover, we need to prepare to contribute from the little savings we have to the victims' assistance fund when the diocesan and parish chapter 11 settlement is finalized and announced. Currently, there are only about 50 people attending Mass each week. The shortage of priests continues, with the average age of priests in our diocese above 65 and at least seven possible retirements this year. Many parishes are left without a resident pastor, leaving their future uncertain and causing their communities to diminish slowly and painfully.

We love our parish and our community! Consequently, at the Town Hall Meeting, we asked ourselves, "What is our 'end game?'" and "How do we want to get there?"

We recognized that while we wished a renaissance of faith were on the horizon, the reality is that we are in a crisis of faith that has been going on and will last for quite some time. Many suggestions were offered concerning how The Mission of Saint Bernadette might remain for the 50 or so people who regularly attend Mass here (e.g., ordination of women, married clergy, Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest, etc.).

Some of these suggestions concern the doctrine of the Church, which is a matter of divine revelation and faith that cannot change. Other suggestions concern the discipline of the Church, which may or may not change. A few suggestions offer an alternative to the celebration of the Eucharist. It was noted that in communities where these alternatives are employed, the population begins to diminish as people tend to migrate to where there is stability, namely, a shepherd (pastor) and the ability to

take part in the offering of Christ that is at the heart of the celebration of the Eucharist (vs. a “Communion Service”).

In the end, the situation in which we now find ourselves exists primarily because there is a crisis of faith. People are not going to Church to worship God and parish communities are left in tough situations in which difficult decisions need to be made.

Accordingly, we discussed the possibility of making the transition to Divine Mercy. The future of The Mission of Saint Bernadette is uncertain for a number of reasons (financial, population decline, shortage of clergy, low Mass attendance, etc.). Nevertheless, we agreed that we do not want to repeat the abrupt closure of the church of Saint Mary in Cleveland.

At any given moment, The Mission of Saint Bernadette (and even Divine Mercy) could find itself without a resident pastor. The effects of this change on the community would be adverse if it happens suddenly. People will stray away again from the faith. We agreed that we do not want this to happen to anyone of the 50 or so people who are currently with us.

A transition to Divine Mercy in the near future would give us the time needed to make sure that every single person is accounted for and ministered to so that our community remains united in the Lord. No one must ever stop coming to Mass because it is being offered in a different building a few miles down the street. At the end of our lives, we will all have to render an account to the Lord of the choices we make, and this must not be one of them.

We will meet again after Christmas to discuss our options. Nevertheless, I wanted to keep you informed and to seek your input. I know that this is a sensitive and difficult topic to discuss and decide. However, we must not leave our situation to chance. As your pastor, you deserve better from me than that. Be assured of my continued prayers, support, and pastoral leadership. Please continue to let me know your thoughts in conversations, letters, etc.

Our parish is a wonderful and very special community! We worship God, we live and share the Good News, and we care for those in need. And we do this together. How blessed we are! The situation in which we find ourselves is currently in our hands. It may not be for much longer. Let us, therefore, ask the Lord to direct us as we strive to do his will.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CRS' or similar initials, written in a cursive style.

Father Christopher R. Seibt

Pastor