

# *St Bernard's State of the Parish Address*

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**Pastor**

## Our History

Before we can begin to talk about the future we must know our past. We are the inheritors of a proud tradition in Omaha. St. Bernard's has served this community with distinction for over 100 years. We are called to continue sharing the message of Jesus of the kingdom of God. We are called to share faithfully and fully the Roman Catholic faith. In our school we continue a great tradition of excellence of education. It is our responsibility to provide for our future.

The first church in the Nebraska Territory was built by Catholics in Omaha. St. Mary's Church, which stood on the east side of Eighth Street between Harney and Jackson streets, was dedicated in August 1856. The simply designed structure measured 24 by 40 feet. It followed, within a year, the first recorded Mass to be said in Omaha by Father William Edmonds of the Diocese of Dubuque.

Catholicism in the area, however, has longer roots, going back to 1838 and the work of Jesuit missionary Father Peter De Smet, who is known to have visited the site of Bellevue.

In 1857, the Vicariate Apostolic of the Nebraska Territory was established, but no one was appointed to administer it until 1859, when James O' Gorman, a Trappist monk, became the first bishop of the area. His see was 367,265 square miles with 5,000 Catholics and three priests. On June 25, 1859, the bishop added to his clergy the first priest ordained on Nebraska soil, Father William Kelly.

The Sisters of Mercy came to the area in 1864 and the Benedictine Sisters in 1865. St. Mary Church, which became the cathedral and had its name changed to St. Philomena, was quickly outgrown and a new Gothic-style cathedral was built in 1868 at Ninth and Howard streets.

By that time, four parishes were established and growing in the area -- St. Mary Magdalene and St. Philomena in Omaha, St. Patrick in Fremont, and St. Patrick in Jackson. The tremendous growth in the area caused more than 70 parishes to be established before 1900.

The Diocese of Omaha, which included Nebraska and Wyoming, was created on October 2, 1885, while James O'Connor was bishop. The diocese was split on August 2, 1887, and reduced to all counties in Nebraska north of the Platte River. At that time the Dioceses of Lincoln and Cheyenne were created. The Omaha Diocese again was split in March, 1912, as the Diocese of Kearney was created.

In 1904, Benson was a suburb of Omaha consisting of a small township and several large dairy farms. One of the largest farms was that of Bernard Post, who first leased to the parish the land where the small white frame church stood, at what today is 61<sup>st</sup> and Miami. A priest came from St. Cecilia's each Sunday to offer mass.

On July 11, 1904, St. Bernard's Church of Benson was formally incorporated with the state of Nebraska as a non-profit, church corporation. The Bishop also created St. Bernard's as a parish.

In 1912, the parish moved to the present location when Bernard Post offered to donate a block of land to the parish on the existing property. The old white frame church was moved at that time. Also, in 1912, it was decided that a Catholic school was needed for the parish community of Benson. A new school house of four rooms was built with the Sisters of Mercy serving as teachers and operators of the school.

By 1919, the parish was debt free, but Benson was quickly becoming a thriving community. Father Buckley encouraged the people of the parish to save money for an expansion.

In 1930, additional property was purchased for a playground. The school house was too small and the church was bursting at the seams with its large congregation each Sunday.

On August 20, 1939, the feast of St. Bernard of Clairaux, the cornerstone of this church was laid. The completed church was dedicated the following year.

The 1950's saw continued growth of both the parish and the school. It was very apparent that an addition would be needed for the school. The school enrollment had reached nearly 900 students by 1955. There were 7 Masses each Sunday by 1958.

Building was almost continuous during the 1950's and early 1960's. The additions to school, a new rectory, and a gym were added. As the parish grew, its boundaries were adjusted. The parish of St. Pius X, St. Richard's, and St. James were created by the Archbishop of Omaha from the original territory of St. Bernard's parish. A new convent was added in 1959. It housed 16 nuns.

In 1965, the first renovation of the church occurred to bring it into line with the new liturgy after Vatican II. Nine masses were offered each Sunday. In 1967, Msgr. McCaslin was named as pastor. He established one of the first parish councils in the archdiocese of Omaha.

By 1977, the Sunday schedule was extended to include an additional mass in the gym and a mass at Roncalli Catholic High School. Several priests were assigned to serve the parish at this time. The student population at this time was over 1100 students. Eventually, St. Elizabeth Ann parish was established.

Also, in 1979, the church had its second major renovation under the direction of Msgr. McCaslin and Brother William Woger of the worship office of the archdiocese. A resurrection cross was installed in the church with new statues, altar, and ambo. The furniture was often moved for each liturgical season of the year. Chairs replaced pews. Carpet was put down on the floor. A wall and then a grill were used to separate the tabernacle and prayer area from the main body of the church. In 1982, the parish mass at Roncalli Catholic ended.

Fr. Tom Ward was named pastor after the death of Msgr. McCaslin. Staff members were added to the parish to fill some ministries that priests were no longer free to do. Liturgies and music were a priority along with the school ministry, ministry to the elderly, RCIA and religious education.

Fr. Roland Peschel was named pastor in 1989. RCIA and liturgies were priority projects for the parish and along with other ministries. Deacon preaching was done every other weekend. Deacons and deacon wives worked very hard for the parish without pay. The school was maintained during this period with a very tight budget and finances. The roof of the school was replaced. School enrollment declined and parish membership also declined. Crime and violence in the neighborhood of the parish continued to increase. Drugs and gang violence were also present in the area. A number of shootings and gang or drug related violence happened during this period. The parish began to have its first participation in OTOC as a response to growing problems and issues of the area. More and more of the faithful members of the parish moved to west Omaha. They continued as members of the parish, but no longer resided inside of the formal boundaries of the parish.

Fr. Jerome Spenner became pastor in 1997. During his tenure, the church roof was repaired. The last renovation of the church nave and sanctuary was completed with pews. We now see it, in all its splendor. A major capital campaign paid for this project over a period of more than five years. Fr. Spenner paid off the parish debt, saved the parish resources from estates when possible, and believed in paying as you go with new work. The inner-city school board was established at this time. Funds from the Archbishop's annual appeal paid for some operations at the school and for over \$150,000 of work in the school building itself. A donor, left a large bequest of almost \$600,000 to the parish at the end of Father Spenner's time as pastor. Half of this bequest was to be used for the school and one half for the parish. All debts were paid off. A large cash reserve was established. Lots of work was done on the school building. However, school enrollment continued to decline, and the number of school classrooms was cut. Religious education and RCIA also declined in numbers. A full-time youth director was employed by the parish along with a full-time development director. The development position was eliminated after the resignation of the development director. A dinner auction was also begun as a fund raising activity.

A year round child care program was started by the parish. It has been a great success. It feeds children into the programs and ministries of the parish.

An excellent church choir was established during this period. Along with several music groups, liturgical music was provided to the parish at most masses on Sunday.

I was appointed pastor by Archbishop Curtiss in 2009. We have done a large amount of work on a rectory renovation and school improvements during my tenure as pastor. Leaks in the rectory office wing and second floor were very serious when I took over as your pastor. We are still short about \$110,000 for the payment of this project. The second collection has been used to pay for the rectory project. St. Richard's parish was closed at the start of my tenure as pastor. We were given the northern portion of St. Richard's territory; however, it did not contain many Catholics.

A large grant of \$100,000 was made to our school for a couple of years. I have learned that this grant will probably not be available in the future.

During the hard times of the great economic recession, most parishes saw a reduction in income. More and more requests were made for food and money by parish members and non-members living in our area. The St. Vincent de Paul Society has been more and more active during the last few years. They receive money from other parishes to help out with the needs in this area.

#### **The Present Situation**

Along with many strengths for the future, there are many challenges ahead for the parish. Our neighborhood will continue to suffer from poverty, unemployment, violence and gangs. Many school parents cannot afford to pay tuition due to lack of work. Many school families and religious education families rarely attend church at St. Bernard's. Only sacramental programs are used by some families.

The buildings on our campus are aging. Many of our buildings need work. Some emergency work has been done, but we cannot afford to do all the work that we would like on our buildings and grounds.

The damage of the elements each year to the sports field, school entrance, and parking areas is progressive. We do what we can to keep these areas from further damage, but we cannot totally stop it. Safety issues for our children are a primary concern. We have updated our fire warning system. We have also added security to our front door.

The greatest strength of the parish is its people and clergy. Without them, there would be no parish community. The community has paid for all that has come before us. This community of faith is very strong. I am sure that we will continue to worship in this church throughout the next few decades and perhaps the entire century. I believe that our worship is strong. Our preaching is good. Our school is excellent. Our lay leadership on staff and in the parish is superior to many parishes in the archdiocese.

We also have a great understanding of our financial situation from day to day. We know about financial matters at the highest levels of parish leadership. We know where the ship of the parish is headed with the financial talent of the parish finance committee. We are improving our technology and computers greatly in the parish. We are beginning new ministries like the parish library and parish book club. We have a strong RCIA program. We have a strong staff. We are improving the collaboration and communication of the parish greatly from department to department and from parish member to the parish staff, etc.

#### **The Future**

All of our long term plans, goals and hopes for the future depend on you. Only you and your family can take responsibility for the future of the parish. Archbishop George Lucas, and I, as his representative want only the very best for each family of the parish. We want to maintain, protect, and pass on the Catholic faith to the next generation of children, young adults, and adults in this parish in a concrete way. However, we depend ultimately on you.

In the future, we cannot depend only on staff and paid professionals to do all ministries in the parish. We have never done this in the past, and we can't in the future. Volunteers who give of their time, talent, and treasure are in short supply. They are aging. We need to ask the question, what can I do for my parish? Instead of the question, what should the parish be doing for me?

We need a new corps of volunteers for this parish to continue our great tradition. We also will need funds to do much of the work that needs to be done on our buildings and grounds.

St. Augustine said, "Grace builds on nature." We depend upon the physical world to have a place to share God's word and the message of Jesus. We cannot simply depend on others to give us this place. We must also be good stewards of the buildings and things of the parish - maintaining them properly and passing them on.

We will need to pay off the remaining expenses from the emergency rectory renovation. This will replenish our cash reserve funds that were used for the renovation. This cash reserve contributes greatly with our parish endowments to the stability of this institution. It enables us to claim with confidence a future that is somewhat free from financial worry.

We need to finish the church renovation. We need a new handicapped entrance to the church, new restrooms, and new south doors. We need a new school entrance, a new sports field, and a parking lot resurfacing to be done in the next few years. We will also need to have funds to pay teachers and staff a just and fair wage. We need money for tuition assistance for families in need. We need in short to do a large capital campaign for a five year period to start to meet these many needs.

I was appointed your pastor for a six year term of office. I can request another six year term from Archbishop Lucas. In obedience to him, I serve as your pastor. Obviously, I will not serve here in this parish forever. I will be called by the church and the Lord to shepherd folks in another place some day. I hope that that day is far in the future. The parish will continue with or without my leadership.

Senator Robert Kennedy once said, "Some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream things that never were, and ask why not." We can believe that we are victims or passive observers of life. Or, we can choose to make wonderful things happen day by day - one person at a time.

I want to seize this moment as pastor to call everyone to the dignity of their baptismal calling, to stand for the parish and the church as a whole, to continue to be the great parish that we are called to be.

***Questions for discussion:***

What are some of the best efforts and ministries that the parish has offered in the past? What is the biggest improvement you would like to see happen for St. Bernard's parish?

What could you do with your time, talent, and financial resources to be more involved and committed to the parish? Could you afford to give to a major five year capital campaign for parish needs?

How can the parish better feed us spiritually? How do we now teach and heal as Jesus did? Where could we as a parish do more?

Do you see yourself more or less involved in the next five years? What kind of a parish and parish programs will be needed in five or ten years?

How is our neighborhood changing? Are we adjusting to these changes? Are we responding to the people's needs in our area?

What future would you like to see for our five day school and religious education programs ?