

Dear Fellow Parishioners,

I hope this letter finds you having a spiritually fruitful Lent and ready to celebrate the High Holy Days of the Sacred Paschal Triduum! I am writing this letter to let you know about a significant change coming to our parish in early summer. As most of you know, our Associate Pastor, Fr. Anthony George, will be concluding his time with us in June and shortly afterwards he will be returning to India. Please join me in thanking Fr. Anthony for his service to our parish community these past couple of years!

However, unlike throughout much of the history of our parish, Fr. Anthony will not be replaced by a new Parochial Vicar (associate pastor). This means that as of June 16th I will be the sole priestly presence at St. Alphonsus. At the moment, I do not know if this will be a short term change of one year or if this will be long term/permanent change. Either way, this change necessitates adjustments to the life of our parish and so I am writing in order to provide some context that helps explain why this change is being made and identify some adjustments that will need to be made.

I am also writing to ask for your prayers and support as this is a significant change for me.

[I do understand that this is a longer letter. If the greater context doesn't move you, discussion of direct reasons why and parish adjustments are found beginning on page 3. The sections immediately following are meant to provide canonical and historical context.]

What is a Parish?

A good place to begin is to remind ourselves what a parish is. A parish has a distinct definition in the Code of Canon Law, which governs the life of the Church. In Canon Law a parish is defined as:

"A certain community of the Christian Faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor as its proper pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop." (CCL 515.1)

Let's unpack this definition a bit:

- First, a parish is *a certain community of the Christian Faithful*. Because parish buildings are important and, as the Irish say, "buildings have memories", they are naturally what we identify as a parish. What is even more important is the community of Christians who inhabits those buildings. Our own history helps to illuminate this understanding. We began as a parish in 1938 but the parish community owned no land and worshiped primarily in what is now the Greendale Middle school gymnasium. It was not until 1953 when the parish community was able to worship in its own building space. We were no

less a parish community before that time and indeed that building space would have been impossible without the *“certain community of the Christian Faithful”* which preceded it.

- The term *“particular church”* means a Diocese (in our case the Archdiocese). A diocese (led by a bishop) is the basic unit of geography of the Catholic Church. A parish is a Christian community that falls within the boundaries of a particular diocese and hence, under the authority of a bishop.
- *“Whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor as its proper pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”* Since no bishop would be able to undertake the pastoral care of every parish in any diocese a pastor is appointed to fill that role and represent the bishop of the diocese to that community.

All of this is to remind us that no parish ever exists in isolation from the rest of the diocese in which it is located. While we have wonderful elements that define our St. Alphonsus parish community, we are and will continue to be affected by events which happen in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and in the nation as a whole.

A Brief Synopsis of parish history in the U.S.

I love history; you know that. I ask for your patient indulgence as I offer some historical context. One of the things I love about history is thinking about how the past affects the present. I cannot give a detailed history of parish life in the United States. I simply wish to paint some broad strokes to identify those that are affecting the life of the Church in the United States.

There have been Catholics in this country since before the Declaration of Independence and one of the signers of that great document was a Catholic. At the beginning we were small, tiny even, and awash in what was decidedly a Protestant culture. The dominant culture often eyed Catholics with great suspicion and occasionally active persecutions of Catholics took place.

By the mid-19th century, with the numbers of Catholics greatly increasing in the country through immigration. such persecution subsided (even if the suspicion remained). With the increasing Catholic population, it was determined by the Church in the U.S. (not without some controversy) to allow parishes to be formed along ethnic groups. This led to a rapid multiplication of the number of parishes in the country and situations where some small towns had two parishes right across the street from each other (e.g., one for the Irish and one for the Italians) creating two communities who would rather throw rocks at each other than talk with each other. That is until their children and grandchildren married each other.

By the 1920s the Catholic Church became a truly influential force in the country at large and was increasingly able to wield that influence to affect the culture. This began what was truly a period of great confidence in the American Catholic Church which would last through the 1960s. These forty years or so would also see an even larger increase in the number of new

parishes and schools formed and even more buildings built on existing parish sites, particularly in the immediate post-WW2 baby-boom decade. However, this period of relative comfort and influence would only really be a blip on the radar screen of our history.

After the tumult of the 1960s and 1970s, the American Catholic Church, along with the Church in the west and religion generally, began to decline. This decline was slow at first but in recent decades it has gained steam. This decline is not only in Mass attendance but it is also felt in the entire Sacramental life of the Church (i.e., #s of Baptisms, Confirmations, weddings, and funeral Masses).

We now find ourselves as a Church in a situation that is increasingly more like the Church in the early decades of the country (only now it is a highly secularized culture that is suspicious of us) than in more recent times. A recent article in the Milwaukee journal covered some of this history as well. You can find it here:

<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/2024/10/16/with-empty-pews-excess-property-catholics-face-a-streamlined-future/75162802007/>

Why are we not receiving a Parochial Vicar?

Because we are part of a greater whole (the Archdiocese) we are always affected by trends, both national and local, which call for adjustments to previous assumptions. This year, we are being affected by such trends. There are a few reasons at the archdiocesan level and one at the local parish level that we are not being assigned a Parochial Vicar for at least this upcoming year.

A. Parish Restructuring around the Archdiocese

Firstly, I know that some of you are aware that in the past couple of years the Archdiocese is beginning to restructure the parishes in the parts of the Archdiocese where there are many parish campuses but not enough priests to administer them effectively. The Archdiocese is not undertaking a diocese-wide initiative like the Diocese of Madison recently undertook. However, The Archdiocese is conducting similar restructuring on an as needed basis. A few recent examples are:

- The 12 parishes in Dodge County are now two parishes, each has one pastor and multiple Parochial Vicars. None of the parish campuses has closed.
- In the city of Racine, 12 parishes have also been restructured down to two parishes, each with a Pastor and multiple Parochial Vicars while keeping all the campuses active.
- A similar restructuring is in the works this coming year for the parishes on the Northwest side of the City of Milwaukee as well as the Northwest corner of Washington County.

This has led the priest placement board of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to prioritize the number of campuses that a particular parish is managing over the population size of a single parish when discerning where to assign parochial vicars.

B. New Struggles with Immigration Policies

Second is new pressures that the Church in the United States is feeling by changing immigration laws and rules regarding religious worker visas which began a couple of years ago.

The Church in the United States has always relied upon a steady stream of international priests; both as missionaries and those who immigrate to the country permanently. This allowed the American Church to form parishes along ethnic/linguistic lines in the first place because we could have priests who spoke particular languages to administer those parishes.

A couple of years ago, the Federal Government either instituted new rules or began to enforce immigration rules more vigorously in regards to those who are in the country on a Religious Worker Visa (I might be a historian but I am certainly not an immigration lawyer). Previously, it was assumed by the Archdiocese that when an individual priest's visa was expiring they could return to their home country for a short period of time to renew this visa until they could apply for permanent residency. However, a couple of years ago, international priests began to need to spend a year or more outside the country. One local pastor has even been stuck outside the country for nearly a year now.

This reality has increased pressure on the priest placement board because some of our Parochial Vicars and pastors need to leave the country for an extended period of time which makes parish placement difficult.

C. A Small Ordination Class This Year

Thirdly, this particular year we are ordaining a very small class of new priests (small for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee anyway); there are only three men to be ordained priests this spring. *This small class size means that there have been many more parishes asking for a parochial vicar than priests available this year.*

There are positives and negatives to everything in life and our situation is no different. We can find a positive development in regards to our budget. As we noted in the fall, just like your home budgets, the parish budget is affected by the higher costs of nearly everything due to inflation. *While we could have made the salary and benefits for a Parochial Vicar work in the budget; not having a parochial vicar on staff unexpectedly provides some more room to ensure that we can cover the 10% increase expected in our building insurance costs, and the 10% increase in the assessment we pay to the Archdiocese, and the 9% increase in health insurance costs, etc.*

What adjustments to parish life will be necessary?

Having only one priest on staff at the parish will require some adjustments to the life of the parish. I am working with the Pastoral Council and the Parish Staff in order to identify and discern these adjustments. Below are some practical adjustments that we will be making. This is still a work in progress so this is not an exhaustive list.

- **Sunday Masses:** We will be retaining our compliment of four Sunday Masses. One of those Masses will be celebrated by a “help-out” priest. We will work to try to locate a priest who can be here regularly but we can’t guarantee that. If, in coming years, it seems that St. Alphonsus will not receive a parochial vicar permanently then we may need to revisit this question.
- **Daily Masses:** Effective June 16th, 2025, there will be a new schedule for daily Masses. It will be: Mondays: no daily Mass; Tuesdays: 5:30pm; Wednesdays: 8:00am (both on school and non-school days); Thursdays and Fridays: 7:00am; Saturdays 8:00am
- **Holy Day Masses:** With the exceptions of Christmas and Ash Wednesday, we will hold two Masses instead of three.
- **Confessions:** Effective the week of June 16th, 2025, the Sacrament of Reconciliation will remain on Wednesdays from 5-6pm. On Saturdays it will available from 3:30-4:00pm.
- **Priest Response Time:** Urgent Pastoral/Sacramental calls are and will remain a priority for me. However, it may take me longer to respond to a call than previously. In years past, if one of the priests received an emergency call but was tied up at that particular moment, typically the other priest could take the call. That won’t be the case this coming year. Sometimes, I might have a commitment that I need to keep or can’t be moved. In such cases, I will get to the call as soon as I am able to.
- **Scheduling:** This is true even now but it bears a reminder. We try our best to accommodate when scheduling events (funeral, weddings, meetings with me, parish events, etc.) but please remember that we are not able to accommodate everything. It is always best to check with the parish before finalizing dates and times.

A Church and Parish “On Mission”

Let me conclude this letter with a broad point and a challenge. Underlying the difficulties that the Archdiocese is facing in priest placement are cultural headwinds that must be faced. During the period of strength for the Church in the United States in the latter half of the 20th Century it seemed that Catholics would always simply show up, even if they weren’t attending Sunday Mass regularly. They would still come to have children receive the sacraments or to get married, or even to have a funeral Mass. This allowed parishes and dioceses to let slide the mandate from our Lord to actively spread the gospel in the hopes the social and familial pressures would take care of this for us.

Unfortunately, in an increasingly secularized culture, those pressures have by and large disappeared. This means that the Church in this country and St. Alphonsus Parish must intentionally take up the great commission of our Lord Jesus to go out to the world and make

disciples of Jesus Christ. There is no program that can fix this or “quick fix” that can provide a short cut to mission. If there was one we would have discovered it by now.

My great dreams for our parish is that we become ever more a community where individuals have an encounter with Jesus who loves them and which leads them to an intentional decision to say yes to the Lord and the relationship He desires to have with them.

Individuals respond to bold challenges and now is the time to boldly and confidently announce the Good News of the Gospel. I challenge all of you to share your faith with those around you! Or if you have not made this commitment to the Lord in your own life, to do so. To let others know that God the Father created them intentionally and uniquely out of His love and wisdom. To let them know that through His sacrificial love, Jesus the Son won the victory over the sin and death which weighs so many down and invites every one of us into a relationship of love, joy and peace with Him. We have the amazing, good news of the Gospel which resides in the Church Jesus intended to found...it is time to share it confidently as Catholics.

I thank you for your patience in reading this letter! I am happy to answer any questions that you might have. The parish staff and pastoral council members are also happy to answer questions.

Thank you for your support and prayers! I hope to see all of you during the Sacred Paschal Triduum!

Saint Alphonsus, pray for us!

God Bless You!

Fr. Kevin