



St. Joseph Catholic Church
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May 8, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

This is an edited version of a letter that I was going to include with the bulletins on the weekend of March 14/15. Unfortunately, that was the weekend that we received new directives from the diocese regarding changes that needed to take effect because of the coronavirus. Within a few days of that weekend, all public Masses were suspended, so this letter never got published. The original letter was only going to be about the personnel changes. Now, I have added more information for you in order to keep you informed of some changes/upgrades to the physical property.

As most of you have heard by now, Msgr. Dan Whelton will be retiring soon. Msgr. Whelton has served at St. Joseph's Parish as administrator for 2 ½ years in 1986, and then in residence until 1994. He returned to serve in residence in 2002 and has been here since then (a total of 26 years at St. Joseph's). He has been here in residence because of all of his responsibilities with the Diocese of Santa Rosa. He has served as Judicial Vicar, Vicar for Clergy, Moderator of the Curia, Chancellor, Priest Personnel Board Director and as Vicar General. When he retires, he will live at St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Petaluma. On a personal note, Msgr. Whelton has been a great mentor and a friend to me. His presence here will be missed and he deserves to enjoy his retirement. This June, Msgr. Whelton will also celebrate his 50th anniversary as a priest. We thank Msgr. Whelton for his 50 years of service as a priest and we wish him the very best. We were originally scheduling two celebrations for him in June, but those have been postponed because we don't know when public gatherings of that size will be allowed to take place again. We will keep you informed as we plan a future date.

We welcome to St. Joseph's Parish Deacon Juventino (Tino) Vera and his wife Martha. Bishop Vasa has graciously assigned him to serve as Deacon here at St. Joseph and to help the diocese in the Family Life Office, effective March 9, 2020. He and Martha live in Windsor and are fluently bilingual in English and Spanish. He was ordained to the permanent diaconate in October of 2000, along with my father. I have worked with Deacon Tino and his wife Martha at two previous parishes and it will be great to have them both join our parish team and family.

We also welcome to the parish, Fr. John Plass. Fr. Plass is one of our newly ordained priests who was ordained on March 7, 2020, along with Fr. Thomas Stuart. Bishop Vasa has assigned Fr. Plass as Parochial Vicar of St. Joseph's Parish (part-time) and as a teacher at Cardinal Newman High School in Santa Rosa (part-time). Fr. Plass has just completed his fourth and final year of theology at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park (the last two months have been by way of online courses because of the shelter in place order). Fr. Plass will be moving into the parish sometime this month.

Like all of you, I am anxious for the day when we can all come back and have Mass in the church again. That decision is up to our government leaders, and even they cannot give us a timeline. It saddens me that the First Communion Masses and the Confirmation Mass scheduled for this month cannot take place on their scheduled days because of the stay at home order. Please know that these will be the first Masses to get rescheduled once we are able to return to the church building as a community. Even if it means that I do not take any vacation time this year. As soon as I get more information, I will pass it on to you all. Also, remember that I am offering a Mass by way of livestream video every day of the week on the parish Facebook page, and then I upload the video to the parish YouTube channel. Links to the times and how you can view the Masses are on the parish website www.sjccotati.org. Believe me, I really miss seeing you. On the topic of the online Masses, you may notice that there is not much music at those Masses. The reason for that is that we do not have a license/copyright to sing the hymns in our hymnals at a broadcast level. Meaning online or televised. That requires a license from a different company than our hymnal company. Using the hymnal only gives us permission to sing those songs during a live non-recorded Mass. There are some hymns that are public domain and do not require a license. For example, some of the chants.

Some changes have also occurred on the property that I would like to share with you. First, the side entrance of the church (the southeast entrance near the St. Joseph rose garden) now has an automatic accessible door. Meaning, that both those doors will open at the push of a button in order to give better access for people in wheelchairs or walkers.

Unfortunately, we have also had more people loitering around the property. Some see our property as a "park" for their kids or their dogs. Others have been more of a suspicious nature. I have had to call the Cotati Police Department several times because of suspicious activity on the property, especially outside the rectory. The Cotati Police Department has been good to us and I am thankful for their help. Some of you may not be aware but there was recently a fire at an abandoned building at St. Eugene's Cathedral. This was a building that was boarded up but, somehow, homeless people would still camp in there. As a result of all of this, we now have security cameras on the property and inside the church, and we are having an alarm system installed in the parish hall (the church and rectory already have a working alarm system). Some might forget that we live on the property, and now, with all of this, I feel a little safer.

All of these projects have been paid through the Diocesan Restoration Fund that we created after the diocese reimbursed the parish \$112,000 (the figure that the diocese estimates Fr. Oscar may have taken from the parish during his five years here). We also used \$10,000 of this money to give to the parish's Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Partly, because Fr. Oscar may have taken money from their collection, but also because we (the Parish Pastoral Council, the Parish Finance Council and me) wanted to help a charitable organization with part of this money. In regard to Fr. Oscar, he "requested laicization as a way of 'making amends' for his actions, avoiding further scandal and restoring justice." This is a quote from the information that was given to me. This process has been accepted and completed by the Holy See. Although it may be hard for some of you, we keep him in our prayers.

I also wanted to update you regarding the parish finances. As you are aware, since we are not having public Masses our income is really down. The parish requires a general weekly collection of \$5,600 in order to operate (that number will go up soon and I will explain why in the next paragraph). The diocese, on our behalf applied for the government SBA loans that were being offered. The loan was approved, and it will cover around two months' worth of salaries and benefits for our employees. However, it will not cover our operation bills like utilities and other expenses. Since Mass attendance was already low the weekend of March 15 and then we entered the shelter in place order, it has been almost two months already. Some of

you have been very generous by maintaining your weekly contributions to the parish by way of online giving, mailing your donations or dropping them off at the parish. I myself give to the parish by way of online giving. It is very easy that way because my weekly offering is automatically deducted from my debit card each week. For more information on online giving, just go to the "Donate" section on the top right of the parish website. Thank you so much for your generosity. Since I know that there are some, if not many, who cannot support the parish financially right now because of economic hardship, I do not want to make anyone feel like they are obligated to give to the parish if they cannot afford to do so. Aside from making your donations to the parish, if you are able to, I also listed three local charities that can use your help right now. Catholic Charities of Santa Rosa, the Sonoma County Chapter of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Redwood Empire Food Bank. Direct links to their donation pages can be found in the links section of the parish website.

However, the time will come very soon when our expenses will increase because the parish will be responsible for 50% Fr. Plass' salary (Cardinal Newman High School will pay the other 50%). Msgr. Whelton's salary is paid by the diocese and the parish only pays for his room and board. So, this will be a new expenditure. But I refuse to see having Fr. Plass here as *an added expense*, because it will be helpful for all of us to have a bilingual associate, even if it is only part-time.

In terms of a timeline of when things can return to normal for public gatherings in the church, I ask for your patience and understanding. This might have to happen in phases for us also. You also may not know that I am available for private confessions, as long as we are maintaining all proper social distancing guidelines. But these are only being done by appointment. If I schedule regular times, we might have long lines that can get us into trouble with the civil authorities.

Finally, please know that all of you are in my daily prayers. Although the church remains closed for public gatherings Bishop Vasa reminded us priests that they are not closed to us, and that we the priests, should be in there praying for our people and for an end to this pandemic. So, please know that I am in the church everyday praying for you. Likewise, please feel free to contact me with any prayer intentions that you may have (even if you want me to mention them in my Masses online). You may do so by emailing me at padre.raul@yahoo.com or calling me at 707-795-4807 extension 113.

Fiat Voluntas Dei,
Fr. Raúl Lemus