There’s no handbook about how a parish is supposed to cope with a pandemic. Like everyone else, we’ve had to struggle with ever-changing circumstances and related challenges. I want to report to you what’s been happening at Old St. Joseph since my last email message on July 8, 2020. I hope that every decision I have made for OSJ since the pandemic began in March has been guided by the moral obligation to provide a safe environment for everyone in all our parish spaces. It has been my consistent policy to avoid actions that could spread COVID-19, and that if I am to err, it will be on the side of our safety. This, I firmly believe, is my responsibility to you as your pastor.

Despite the inevitable frustrations and differences, Old St. Joseph’s has found ways to continue to live in faith. Our life of worship and faith formation, our committees and ministries, and even meeting the needs of our physical plant, are very much alive, despite the many obstacles. Regarding parish finances, a complete financial report covering the past fiscal year will follow later.

I. Worship and Faith Formation

At first, way back in March and early April, many people anticipated that the strict quarantine would be of relatively short duration. (Remember the President’s confident prediction that the churches would be full once again on Easter Sunday?) Therefore, I was reluctant to invest in expensive new technologies, and so we began by simply posting the audio recordings, first of the Liturgy of the Word, and then of the full Mass. As the pandemic wore on, we saw a greater need and so adapted and turned to live-streaming. There have been some bumps along the road, but we now have a relatively high-quality and low-cost system that allows viewers access to the Mass both on Vimeo.com and on Facebook Live.

A few words of reflection are in order. Many of the most highly respected liturgists and sacramental theologians in the church have expressed serious reservations about live-streaming and video recordings of Masses. Why is this? For fifty years, since the Vatican Council, great emphasis has been placed on the full and active participation of the congregation at Mass. Many are apprehensive that much of that liturgical progress will be undermined if the practice of simply observing the Mass on the internet becomes too prevalent in the church. I share those concerns. In my experience, celebrating a live-streamed Mass before a basically empty church with the virtual congregation watching through the camera hanging from the organ loft is not a full celebration of the Eucharist. On the other

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hand, now that we know that for so many of us, the deprivation of attending Mass has already extended beyond six months and may unfortunately continue even much further, we have to manage as best we can.

We have to trust that faithful Catholics will make their own mature and reasoned judgments about the circumstances that we all must contend with, and that they will make the proper adjustments as those circumstances change over time. If grandparents, for example, have reluctantly acclimated themselves to greeting their young grandchildren exclusively on Zoom, they will easily understand that watching the Mass is a similar experience—a far cry from the real thing. When the pandemic finally passes, they will enthusiastically hug their grandchildren, just as they will want to return to Mass when it is safe to do so. Nevertheless, the problem with live-streamed Masses is real and well to keep in mind.

Much depends, of course, on the overall conditions in our city of Philadelphia. Will a so-called second wave inundate the city and force a greatly dreaded renewed lockdown? Or will the relative progress we have been experiencing recently continue to improve so that more restrictions can be relaxed? Or will the much hoped-for vaccine materialize and prove itself to be both safe and effective? No one knows for sure. As OSJ has navigated these uncertainties, I have been grateful for the generosity of so many health care professionals in our parish, who have shared their wisdom and guidance with me.

My hope is that we will be able in coming weeks to return some of our traditional practices to our Sunday liturgical schedule: more liturgical music, but probably not congregational singing; fuller homilies; expanding the weekend Mass schedule.

One insurmountable problem is imposed by social distancing. Because of the relatively limited floor space in our church, social distancing restricts the number of people who can be safely accommodated—23 spaces, each space limited to at most four people from the same household. I suspect that social distancing restrictions will not be lifted in the near term. Can these restrictions be somewhat relaxed by adding more spaces without compromising safety? Sadly, a number of the features that under normal circumstances add a certain charm and pleasant ambiance to our church space work against us during the pandemic.

The heart of parish life is of course the sacramental life of the church, centered in the Eucharist. In addition to the public Sunday Eucharist at 7:30 AM and 11:30 AM and the live-streamed Mass at 9:30 AM, we have been celebrating the 12:05 daily Mass, Monday–Friday. Since last March, the parish staff has been taking turns posting reflections on each day’s scriptures on the parish website, a practice we are continuing.

The full sacramental life of the church also includes the celebration of the other sacraments. Last June we were finally able to celebrate the sacramental reception of the participants in our RCIA program, a ceremony that had to be postponed because of the cancellation of all the ceremonies of Holy Week. The RCIA program for people seeking reception into the church will begin again later this fall. Later in September, we will celebrate first communion with the young children who were deprived of that opportunity last May when so many restrictions were still in full force.

In recent weeks, Fr. Hannafey has helped us return to the celebration of infant baptism, although we have put on hold hopes to begin communal celebrations of the sacrament. As you may know, the hospitality that OSJ offers to engaged couples is a significant part of our parish ministry. The celebration of weddings has been a particular challenge. Perhaps no occasion seems more incompatible with the practice of social distancing. Many couples have asked to reschedule their original wedding date, some two or even three times. Despite the challenges, we have been fortunate to work with many faith-filled couples to celebrate the sacrament of marriage as part of our community of faith. While the ceremonies have
been necessarily small, we have been glad to make the parish live-stream available to share their celebrations with distant family and friends.

II. Parish Committees and Ministries

As with many aspects of contemporary living, the pandemic imposed what at first seemed like insurmountable obstacles to parish communications. Before the pandemic, here at OSJ, we were not totally behind the communications eight ball. Fortunately, the parish website had been updated before the pandemic began, and it has been a significant communication channel for us all. Likewise, the parish bulletin (now published on the website) and our Facebook page (@OSJ19106) are reliable ways to stay in touch with parish life. Thanks to the hard work of OSJ business manager Eric German, our on-line giving mechanisms were updated and in good order so that parish financial support has not seen a disastrous drop with the suspension of in-person Mass as some other parishes have experienced. Throughout the decision-making process of closing and reopening the parish, Constant Contact emails were sent out to every parishioner whose email address is on record. (If OSJ doesn’t have your email, please send it to office@oldstjoseph.org).

But when it became clear that the pandemic restrictions would last longer than a month or two, the parish staff turned with more and more attention to digital communication. In addition to live-streaming Sunday Mass as described above, the parish acquired a Zoom license, and a number of parish committees began meeting via Zoom.

The Parish Council met twice last spring to discuss the parish’s response to the pandemic and already has a schedule for future meetings—by Zoom—through the coming year. The Adult Education Committee was also among the first to get to work virtually, responding to the racial tensions we have all felt in our nation by sponsoring parish wide discussions based on the book by noted Catholic theologian Bryan Massingale. The Social Justice Committee, too, kept an active agenda, collaborating with a number of agencies and organizations in the Archdiocese and wider community that are engaged in meeting the needs in our city. And the Young Adult Community made many of its regular gatherings virtual.

Soon the Finance Committee and the Historic Preservation Committee will be meeting by Zoom. PREP, OSJ’s Parish Religious Education Program, will also be offered on Zoom, and we anticipate that much of the parish’s life will continue virtually throughout this fall and winter. There will undoubtedly be more bumps in the road as we all become more technically adept than we ever thought we’d be. I am confident though, that with patience and grace, much of the parish life that was so rudely suspended last spring will continue to flourish in new and unexpected ways.

But in my opinion, most noteworthy of all is the work of Food Faith & Friends, which has continued to serve in-person lunch three days each week to homeless people in our city. The generous volunteers under the direction of Debbie Hlunchan have worked tirelessly all through this pandemic to provide a nourishing take-away meal under very trying circumstances. If the Lord is gracious to our parish community, I am convinced that the charitable work of Faith, Food & Friends will be one shining source of God’s grace conferred on OSJ.

Flowers are blooming in the Willings Alley courtyard, thanks to Joe Casey’s diligent care.

III. Physical Plant

Another problem we faced at OSJ is the lack of air-conditioning during the summer months. Our air-conditioning system failed in September 2019. After
a careful study, we accepted a proposal to replace significant parts of the system at an approximate cost of $350,000. The original schedule called for the full installation of the new system by the end of April. (I was praying for a cool Holy Week.) Then the pandemic changed everything. Not only installation, but even the supply chain for equipment and parts was disrupted. Only now, in September, is the new air-conditioning becoming operational, ironically just in time for the arrival of cool weather. The result was that through July and August truly uncomfortable conditions prevailed in the church and Barbelin Hall. On the other hand, this condition—of no air-conditioning—forced us to maximize the ventilation and importation of outside air into the church, which as we know is one of the best ways to minimize the spread of the virus in a confined space. While perhaps the lack of air-conditioning a blessing in disguise, the uncomfortable conditions no doubt suppressed attendance, even below the restricted level that our space permitted.

The finishing touches were completed on the courtyard project. Regrettably, the pandemic has interfered with large groups of people and the disabled availing themselves of the convenience of the improved access to the church and Barbelin Hall. But when the pandemic is lifted, our doors will be wide open with handicapped access throughout.

IV. Reflections

This report covers just some of the activities that have engaged us here at OSJ over the last six months or so. But these activities, important as they are and as sensitive a role as they play in many of our lives, tell only part of the story of life during this pandemic. This has been a profound testing period for all of us: for people who have lost a loved one or themselves suffered a debilitating illness, for people who have had to face severe economic loss or insecurity, for those who feel isolated or even abandoned because of being cut off from normal human interaction. All of these personal crises are compounded by the social unrest, racial tensions and imperatives to create a more just society.

Before I celebrate Mass, I frequently like to choose what will be my favorite prayer during the coming celebration. Lately I’ve found myself focusing on the prayer right after the Our Father:

*Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, and graciously grant peace in our days.*

*By the help of your mercy may we be always free from sin and safe from all distress as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.*

This strikes me as the prefect prayer for all of us during these days when there is so much distress, anxiety and worry. Under this kind of stress, it is easy to lose patience with one another, to respond to so much frustration by lashing out at others, to fall into depression and despair. So it is appropriate to pray that we can be free of sin. But if present circumstances present such dangers, they can also be transformed by faith into moments of grace. There is no magic program—certainly not one that can be sent through the internet—that can affect this miracle, but only the action of the Spirit acting within the secret places of our hearts. So we must pray, which is to say transform ourselves, to be perfectly open to the action of the Spirit. We feel cut off from one another, so we may think that our prayers are necessarily solitary. But that is not entirely the case. We are a community of faith, which means our bonds transcend mere appearances and physical distances.

Let me close by attesting to a fact that I see almost daily in the extensive correspondence I have been privileged to receive from so many of you. There is a vast network of prayer and concern that unites our parish community, and in fact extends even beyond our normal boundaries. You should know that you are not alone. Of all the activities that engage our community, whether centralized under parish administration or a product of individual initiative, the most important activity is the union you are part of as expressed in the yearning of so many of your fellow believers who pray, perhaps in their own words, that all of us will be safe from all distress as we wait in joyful hope.

God bless us all.

Walter F. Modrys SJ
Pastor