

## **St. Oliver Plunkett Parish 40 Years of faithful giving – joyful witness: Homily 11/4/2018**

The life of a small Christian community of 350 Catholics had a humble beginning at South Gwinnett High School with a Mass celebrated by Fr. Terry Kane in 1978. It was 40 years ago. Some of you were blessed to be there on that special day. Can we ask you to please stand to be recognized? You are living witnesses and faithful witnesses of what God has done in through this faith community. You have been an integral part of the growth and development of this parish. In opening the Year of Consecrated life, Pope Francis urged the religious in 2015, “You must remember the past with gratitude, live the present with passion, and embrace the future with hope.” So, we gratefully remember and cherish the memories that brought us this far in our journey. There were lots of struggles, sacrifices, joys and sorrows, thanks to the pioneers of our parish, the men and women, the staff, priests, deacons, volunteers, and our benefactors and friends who made it possible. We want to give thanks to God for the priests who served us as shepherds, the pastors that led us, the hands that fed us with the Body of and Blood, the priests and deacons who married us, blessed us at various vital moments of our life and ushered some into eternal life, the hands that held us in moments of joy and sorrow and reached out to those in need.

We gratefully remember Fr. Terry Kane, the founding pastor who set the goal of building up the parish with mostly Catholics who moved from the North East and from everywhere else. With sheer hard work, a small church was built and dedicated in 1981. It was the beginning of a great legacy of growth under leadership of Fr. Beltran who brought along lots of administrative skills, and then came the first La Salette Missionary, Fr. Tom Carroll. He was indeed a visionary who saw the need for a bigger church along with a religious education for the rapidly growing number of young families and parishioners. Thanks to his efforts with dedicated parishioners we saw the new church dedicated in 2000 and also the Carroll Center of Religious Education. From 350 Catholics to 2400 families over the span of 40 years is remarkable indeed. God has blessed us enormously. Fr. Kane, Beltran and Carroll are no longer with us but praying for us from heaven. We acknowledge the work done by Fr. Cliff Hasler who now serves our La Salette community in Hartford. Fr. Jim Henault, during his tenure as pastor, expanded the parking, bought three new houses that now serve as adult education center, La Salette House of prayer, and rectory. Another major step in the growth of the parish was an influx of Hispanic Catholics who made St. Oliver their home parish and Fr. Jim began offering mass in Spanish in 2003. Fr. Juan de la Cruz, may his soul rest in peace, served the Hispanic community for almost 15 years. Fr. John Welch, that tall man with Boston accent from Salem served us for three years as Pastor and initiated the plan for a Columbarium. I want to gratefully remember Fr. Mike Flanagan, Fr. Peter, Fr. Neil Jones, Fr. Tom Hum and Fr. Dimitri. The pastors who led us could not have done this without the help of these associates. I want to acknowledge all the deacons that served the parish very well over the years and who continue to give themselves in ministry. Behind the success of every priest is a group of men and women who are the staff of the parish who do a lot of behind the scene works that often goes unnoticed and unappreciated. And so, I would like to acknowledge and appreciate all of you staff who made it this far with huge success. May God bless you and all the volunteers of this parish who make things happen day in and day out.

Pope Francis urges us to live lives of missionary discipleship, and to carry out this mission with fervent passion, being engaged and active in every aspect of parish life. All of you parishioners, you have demonstrated a great deal of love for the parish over the years in supporting it financially, physically, spiritually and created a thriving community of believers. Being passionate about the parish, its ministries, programs and projects is the dream of all pastors. Passion for the young people who receive religious education and the adults who benefit from our adult faith formation programs, and passion for the poor who are in need of our help. This parish went beyond the borders to Argentina to support the soup kitchen, adopt a child for education, and twin with La Salette parish in Labanda in solidarity.

Just as we are grateful and passionate, we embrace the future with hope and determination to make a difference in the lives of our young and older members of parish. The energy, enthusiasm and vitality and creativity of our young church, and the commitment of our older members give reason for our hope. Over the years the composition of our parish community has changed. There is richness in the variety of cultures, we have new members from the African continent, South America and Latin Americas, from the North and from the South. Embracing future with hope means embracing our vitality and differences in the midst of diversity. To find common ground, to build bridges, and welcome all is the task that awaits us. The future may be chaotic at times and also uncertain, but we rely on and find our hope in the Lord who brought us this far that he will not abandon us but accompany us till the end. We are one Church united in faith, hope and love. One consistent theme that I have noticed from the stories of our parishioners is that feeling of being a family at St. Oliver's where everyone is welcome. Families have grown and built life-long friendships and relationships right here on these grounds. I hope and pray that we will enjoy a time of rebirthing, refounding, and renewal of our parish in the years ahead.

We build our future on the foundation of love with which we are created by our God. Our purpose in life is to give witness to that love and love our neighbors whoever that may be. To become joyful witnesses amid a divided and polarized nation, we remember that love that brought us, redeemed us and held us as his children all these years, God's love. *People of St. Oliver's, you shall love the Lord your God with all your strength, with all your soul, with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself. Take to heart these words. What we celebrate today is nothing but memories of those who took to heart these words during these 40 years and witnessed to God's love in this faith community and gave it all for the love of God and neighbor. The proof is in the pudding. The proof is in the works that we have accomplished.*

Our work, our love, our witnessing, our giving is not done yet. There's so much to be done. Many are the challenges that we face, declining numbers, growing debts, leaking roofs, but if we stand together we can get the job done. We have the young church to form, the adults to deepen their understanding of faith, the elderly to take care of, the poor to be reached out to, and the works with which we say we love our God and our neighbor. All that God desires of us to love Him with all our strength and he will accompany us with His grace and blessings for many years to come. Let's be grateful for the past, continue to serve our parish with passion and embrace the future with hope. May St. Oliver Plunkett, our patron, and Mary our Mother intercede for all of us with Jesus our good shepherd. Amen.

Fr. Cyriac C. Mattathlanickal, MS, Pastor – 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Homily, November 4, 2018