



# FACING A GLOBAL CRISIS WITH GREAT FAITH AND CONTINUED DISCIPLESHIP

## *FAMILIES IN FAITH PARISHES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19*

This spring, the global pandemic that began changing the way Americans live — and worship — was an entirely unprecedented event. While the Families in Faith parishes, like all Catholic churches across the world, had to adapt to new ways of serving God's people, one thing remained the same — the strong faith and active discipleship of our community. Throughout this challenging time, Fr. Antony Thekkekara has continued to provide spiritual nourishment for parishioners and has, in turn, been inspired by the acts of faith he has witnessed taking place in our parish families over these past few months.

Thanks to the livestream of weekend Masses on the Families in Faith website and parish Facebook pages, parishioners have been able to stay connected to liturgical celebrations taking place in our community. Many of God's faithful have found the opportunity to follow the Mass from their homes to be a source of great spiritual enrichment, and Fr. Antony has enjoyed receiving their positive comments and feedback. He has also taken the time to continue connecting with parishioners through



the mail with several pastoral letters going out during this time of social distancing.

Seeing the many ways that our parishioners have continued to be active disciples of Christ during this time of social distancing has been a great source of inspiration for Fr. Antony.

"I know that many people are praying at home and watching Mass and doing other things at home," he says. "Even in their



## GROWING IN STEWARDSHIP, SHARING IN SCRIPTURE STUDY AND FORMATION

Part of being a disciple of Christ means that we are called to a continued journey of growth and discovery, leaving behind what St. Paul describes as the “basic teaching about Christ” and “advance[ing] to maturity” (Hebrews 6:1). Though we can certainly do this on our own, St. Theresa parishioner Julie Landgren says there is something beautiful about journeying alongside one’s fellow parishioners through adult faith formation.

“God is certainly calling me as an individual, but also I think it’s very important to grow as a community together,” Julie says. “It’s a beautiful opportunity to grow with other parishioners and actually enhances your parish community — which, in turn, enhances the diocese and, ultimately, the entire Church.”

This is just one of the reasons that Julie has loved participating in St. Theresa’s current Bible Study program — Jeff Cavins’ *Bible Timeline: the Story of Salvation*. Now about halfway through, this 24-week program is designed to provide Catholics with a greater appreciation and understanding of the salvation narrative from beginning to end.

“It’s just a wonderful, wonderful series,” Julie says.

“These are readings that those of us who are cradle Catholics like me have heard at Mass our whole lives,” adds Sacred Heart parishioner Cathy Hansen. “But to go through the study and then hear them again during the Sunday reading, they just kind of pop open like never before. Having listened to Jeff’s insights and gotten the cultural

and historical background, you just see the story in a whole new way.”

Both Cathy and Julie are members of the Families in Faith Formation Committee. Working together as representatives of our tri-parish community, their goal is to find new ways to help form and support our parish members in the faith journey. Over the years, this has taken form in a wide variety of Bible and spiritual book studies, all designed to provide new insight into the richness of our Catholic faith. At the same time, these weekly gatherings help bring parishioners together in new ways, forming lasting friendships through the spiritual support and sharing that occurs.

“It’s the discussion and the face-to-face interaction — that feeling of all being on the journey together,” Cathy says. “Just knowing that I have friends on the journey is really important.”

St. Michael parishioner Jeanie Seier says that studying the Bible and growing in the faith is one of the most important things we can do with regards to stewardship. It allows you to get to know and become closer to God. This, in turn, enables us to become better disciples of Christ as we then live out the Gospel message in our daily lives.

“I feel like no matter how many Bible studies we have, we’ll never have enough,” Jeanie says. “I just wish more people would take advantage of these opportunities and become involved. They don’t have to talk if they don’t want. They can just be there and listen.”

“There is always room for one more,” Cathy adds. “Everybody is welcome.”

*If you would like more information about the Bible Timeline series or future faith formation opportunities, please contact Julie Landgren (St. Theresa) at 308-654-3313, Cathy Hansen (Sacred Heart) at 308-219-0270, or Jeanie Seier (St. Michael) at 308-497-2606.*



## *A Letter From Our Pastor*

# GETTING READY TO WELCOME YOU HOME

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

To those of you who have been actively participating in the life of our parish but have been forced to stay away due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we look forward to welcoming you home very soon!

To those of you who haven't been to church in years and decided to renew your faith, we are especially excited for the day when we can welcome you back, and welcome you home!

During these past few months, we have experienced some of the most challenging and unnerving times in the history of our nation and Church. As we start to emerge from the darkness of this crisis and are finally getting close to returning to Mass and parish activities and ministries, I feel blessed and excited.

Excited to once again soon see those familiar faces.

Excited to once again soon see all the new faces.

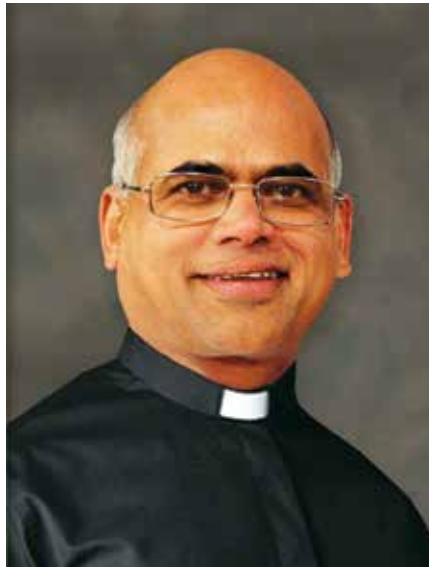
And excited to see the faces of those we haven't seen in a while but have decided to come back!

In times like these when nothing seems to make sense, I can't wait to see you all soon. The timing of your return will be perfect, because we need Christ now more than ever.

Whether you have simply been forced to stay away while public Masses were canceled, or if you have been away from the Church for many years, this crisis has changed us.

All of us.

We have had some extra time lately for introspection. For personal reflection. And for prayer. And perhaps during this era of isolation



and social distancing, you have found yourself yearning for Christ more than ever before in the hopes of finding some meaning to all of this.

You have come to the right place.

On that day when you are able to walk through our doors for the first time in months — or perhaps even years — I hope you see the face of Christ in myself and in all those around you. I hope you find a welcoming parish family there to greet you, overjoyed by your return.

As Christ tells us, from Matthew's Gospel, "When I was a stranger, you welcomed me" (Mt. 25:35). Truth is, there are no strangers at our parish. So, as you come back home to our parish, I hope and pray you experience that same spirit of hospitality from your fellow parishioners.

Whether you're a longtime parishioner, or someone who fell away from the Catholic Church and are now ready to become renewed in the faith, let us remember to welcome all who enter our doors with open arms, smiling faces and a servant's heart. By living out our calling as Christian stewards, we will all emerge from this dark time as a community of faith that is stronger than ever — together.

Welcome back. And welcome home.

Sincerely yours in Christ and His Mother,

Fr. Antony  
Pastor

# CELEBRATING 65 YEARS OF FAITH



*Fr. James Murphy (at far right) takes the mic during Mass, to the delight of all.*



*Fr. Murphy says Mass with assistance from Fr. Antony.*

There was that voice. So definite. So positive. It was a clarifying moment for James Murphy that Friday evening so long ago in Los Angeles.

"It wasn't in my head," he recalls. "It wasn't a conscious thought. It was what God wanted me to do. I think that it was 'Yes, God!' It wasn't like, 'Do you want to be a priest?' It was 'You want to be!'"

It had been a long journey to this point, but after his period of study and discernment, James Murphy became Fr. James Murphy on May 3, 1955, during his ordination in Grand Island.

Now, in celebration of his 65 years of priesthood, Families in Faith will fete Fr. Murphy with Mass and dinner on Aug. 8. He also will celebrate with his family during a reunion that weekend.

Fr. Murphy has reached the venerable age of 94, but he is far from retired. He has been serving at St. Theresa in Ericson, and he also participates in the RCIA process each year, as well as speaking to our junior and senior high school students as they prepare for Confirmation, and afterward.

Fr. Murphy's story begins during his high school years at Spalding Academy before World War II, when, under the tutelage of the Dominican Sisters, he was contemplating becoming a teaching brother. But when he posed the idea to his mother, her reaction was tepid. He put the thought out of his mind.

The war was ongoing while Fr. Murphy was in high school, where his friends all anticipated going into the army upon graduation.

"I thought it, too," he says. "I'll go to war and I'll be killed and everyone will think I was a hero. I wasn't worried about it."

He did join the U.S. Army, and at this point in the war, he was being trained for the invasion of Japan.

"We'd have been in the third wave of troops to invade," he says. "I went for five weeks of training and thought I wasn't going to come back."

But when Japan surrendered, this development put him into something of a dilemma. He would have to decide what to do. The thoughts of becoming a priest returned, but he did not follow them.



# FUL SERVICE IN THE PRIESTHOOD:

## *Fr. James Murphy*

After the war, he was stationed in Hawaii where he had a good office job with the Adjutant General.

"I had lots of time off," Fr. Murphy recalls. "I really lived it up. But I was wondering what I'd do."

When his father suffered a series of heart attacks, the Red Cross arranged for his trip home. Fortunately, his father recovered, but this left Fr. Murphy's Army career at a crossroads.

"The Army wouldn't send me back to Hawaii, so they sent me to Camp Polk in Louisiana," he says. "It was terrible! From Hawaii, to Camp Polk — this was bad! I was frustrated. I had no training after basic training. I had 17 weeks and four weeks of training for hand-to-hand combat. I was trained to kill. I was a trained killer."

His unhappiness led him to go AWOL twice — and he was caught both times, but no charges stuck.

"I could have been court-martialed," he says, laughing at the memory. "I'm so deeply in debt to God — so I'm paying it off by being a priest!"

Once he was mustered out, Fr. Murphy returned to Los Angeles, where he had worked before the war on the railroad. The pay was good, and he advanced in seniority.

"So, I thought this was the career I'd have," he says.

His Aunt Lucille and her husband lived in Southwest Los Angeles, and he and his brother lived in an apartment behind their house.

"My Aunt was very religious, so I'd go to Mass with her each morning and then go to work on the railroad," he says. "I did that from December of 1945 to August 1946. Then a novena of the Miraculous Medal was started at the Parish Church on every Wednesday night. Each Wednesday night I'd go to that."

But that one Friday night, Fr. Murphy had no date. His nieces and nephews asked him if he wanted to go out with them. He declined. His aunt and uncle asked him to go with them to Casino Night at Mount Carmel High School.

"I said, 'no,'" he says. "I didn't want to go."

The radio was playing the program, "Inner

Sanctum," that always opened with the sound of a creaking door.

"That sound coordinated with the door of the house as they left," he says. "And as soon as the door shut, I thought I heard the voice, 'What do you want to do? You want to be a priest!' I never turned back. That was it."

His first assignment as a priest was at St. James in Kearney, and after that, he went to Mitchell & Morrill Nebraska. Next came Holy Rosary in Alliance, then a temporary assignment at Chadron, then to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Scottsbluff.

"I left my heart there," he says. "I loved it."

Several more assignments followed before he retired in 1993.

"My dad died at the age of 65, and I thought I would, too, so I thought I'd retire," Fr. Murphy says. "But I'm still alive!"

During his retirement he returned to the family farm, where he helped his brother run the operation and care for a handicapped brother.

Through the arc of his priesthood, Fr. Murphy believes the biggest change he has seen in the Church is lay participation.

"When I was ordained, the priest was God, a dictator, and had absolute authority and he exercised that," he says. "That's the way it was."

But now, with lay people participating in the Mass and helping with parish operations, this has changed the priest's role.

"It's like having another hand," he says. "It's great to have that support and counsel from lay people."

The Mass planned for Aug. 8 will be a polka Mass — something Fr. Antony first encountered when he arrived here for Fr. Murphy's 60<sup>th</sup> Jubilee.

Fr. Antony cites Fr. Murphy's generous support of Spalding Academy and his support of the Church.

"Fr. Murphy has a unique way," he says. "He's so enthusiastic about speaking with everybody. I ask him to speak on any subject, and he's ready. The kids in the CCD classes all admire him with love and devotion. They always look up to him."



# HANDS-ON LEARNING THROUGH



*Altar servers play an important role in ensuring that Mass runs smoothly and people are able to pray during the liturgy.*

As the famous saying goes, “Tell me and I’ll forget; teach me and I’ll remember; involve me and I’ll learn.” You don’t have to spend much time around educators or experts to be convinced of the idea that the more children are involved in an experience, the more integrated the knowledge becomes in their minds, and even their hearts. And while this is true of virtually any subject, it certainly applies in a significant way to learning the faith.

Here in our Families in Faith community, we hope to give our young people an opportunity to learn about their faith in a way that empowers them to practice it, while also giving back in service, as an altar server. And while the details of how this ministry works may vary slightly parish to parish, the heart of it is the same.

Our altar servers have a number of different roles, primarily focused on serving and assisting the priest during Mass, ensuring that many of the details of the liturgy are attended to, so that our priests may focus on leading



*This hands-on involvement in the Mass has a powerful impact on kids’ understanding and engagement with the liturgy.*

our community in worship.

But for those who serve, not only is it an opportunity to help Mass flow smoothly, it is also a chance to learn more about the behind-the-scenes of the liturgy and why we “do what we do,” getting an up-close view to what takes place on the altar. According to Angie Pfeifer, who coordinates both the CCD program and altar servers at Sacred Heart, this hands-on involvement in the Mass has a powerful impact on kids’ understanding and engagement with the liturgy.

“The way I look at it is, this gives them the opportunity to be active and participating in Mass, rather than just sitting there and letting distractions run amok in their mind,” Angie says. “I’m a Special Ed teacher, and I like for everything to be hands-on — when you become hands-on, you understand it more.”

“When children are invited to become altar servers, they feel very involved in the Mass itself, they get to be part of the liturgy team, and they’re involved in a very special and intimate way,” adds Janelle Pritchard, who

# SERVICE: ALTAR SERVER MINISTRY

trains and helps to coordinate the servers at St. Michael.

Beginning in upper elementary school, students have the opportunity to learn how to altar serve. The training usually takes place as part of the usual CCD classes, or at Spalding Academy, with children receiving guidance on both the practical aspects of serving, as well as explanations for specific parts of the liturgy.

“There are so many details that bring the Mass together, but you don’t always realize what goes on behind the scenes and what the purpose is,” Angie says. “I think this gives [servers] a deeper sense of the Mass.”

“Once you participate in the Mass itself, you feel connected,” Janelle says. “They learn so much more from the priest directly. If they have questions, they’re talking to the priest and getting answers from him.”

Angie encourages the youth of our parishes to consider serving their parish family in this way. She reminds parishioners of the importance of our students learning to serve and become involved in the parish community, from an early age.


“You learn more about how everything works in our community,” Angie says. “I feel if [children] don’t get involved as a young person, they will not get involved later on, because they won’t be comfortable with it. Being a server is kind of the stepping stone and the foundation they need to become more involved in the Church.”



*We hope to give our young people an opportunity to learn about their faith in a way that empowers them to practice it, while also giving back in service, as an altar server.*

*For more information, or to become involved as an altar server, contact Angie Pfeifer (Sacred Heart) at 785-410-7285 or [Angie.pfeifer13@gmail.com](mailto:Angie.pfeifer13@gmail.com); Janelle Pritchard (St. Michael) at 308-497-2249; or Jerilee Wright (St. Theresa) at 402-340-7138 or [jerileewright270@gmail.com](mailto:jerileewright270@gmail.com).*





Non-profit organization  
US Postage  
PAID  
Permit # 32993  
Spalding, NE 68665

## FAMILIES IN FAITH

150 W. Marguerite St. | P.O. Box 310  
Spalding, NE 68665 | 308.497.2662  
[www.families-infaith.com](http://www.families-infaith.com)

Return Service Requested

# FACING A GLOBAL CRISIS WITH GREAT FAITH AND CONTINUED DISCIPLESHIP

*continued from front cover*

families, they are able to spend more time in prayer, and that dependence on God is there. Some families have signed up for electronic fund transfers [to continue their stewardship of treasure], and there have also been some people who came to our office with money. People are generous despite all this.”

Although Fr. Antony certainly misses seeing everyone gather for worship in our area parishes, he is greatly heartened by how well our parishioners have risen to the challenge of continuing to live in faith as active disciples during this unprecedented time. He has no doubt that when we return to worship together as a community, our parishes will be even stronger than ever!

“I think what people miss most is the connectivity,” he says. “Of course, we can

make phone calls, but seeing and meeting each other and coming together as a community as the body of Christ — that is missing. For us Catholics, that community aspect of coming together, praying, and being together is very fundamental.

“But this too shall pass,” Fr. Antony continues. “One thing that has come out of this is that it does help us get back to a deeper faith, to get back to relying more on God. With all the materialism, our dependence on God had been reduced. I think this is a wake-up call or warning that this [world] is not permanent, and there are other things you need to pay attention to. I think we will be much stronger for this, and it will bring us closer together and deepen our faith and our reliance on God.”

## MASS SCHEDULE:

**7 p.m. Saturday** - St. Michael in Spalding | **7 a.m. Sunday** - St. Michael in Spalding  
**9 a.m. Sunday** - Sacred Heart in Greeley | **11 a.m. Sunday** - St. Theresa in Ericson