



SAINT MARTHA CHURCH AND SCHOOL

1100 WEST GRAND RIVER AVENUE, OKEMOS, MICHIGAN 48864-3015
CHURCH 517-349-1763 • WWW.ST-MARTHA.ORG • SCHOOL 517-349-3322

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Dear Saint Martha Parishioners,

Ever since I came to Saint Martha Parish in the spring of 2017, I have heard people talking about the importance of attracting young families and building a new generation of parishioners. It's been wonderful to see that, for many parishioners, this isn't just talk - I have witnessed many of our older parishioners going out of their way to welcome young couples who seem to be visiting.

A concrete step toward improving ministry among the young was the hiring of Jarrid Thelen. He is doing excellent work in his dual position of overseeing middle school and high school youth groups, as well as programs for young adults. We still have a lot of ground to cover in these regards, but Jarrid's energy and focus are paying dividends.

Another step was taken this autumn and winter. Jackie Rosalez and I telephoned every family in the parish that has young children who are not enrolled in our school, in our religious education program, or in the on-line home-schooling option we recently began to offer. This was a warm and friendly exercise that led to a number of quite productive conversations. As we spoke with parents, we were able to extol Jackie's outstanding program, and open parents' eyes to the home-school option in which they, too, would be learning along with their children. Of course, one of the great features of Jackie's religious education program is the frequent occurrence of all-family events - remember, parents are the first educators of their children, and so religious ed always begins and ends with parents!

This brings me to our most visible program for bringing young families into the parish - Saint Martha School. For some time now, you have been reading and hearing me say that our tuition is the highest in the area and that a substantial cut is in order.

Let me put a number to it. Linda and I had a family that might be seen as fairly typical. Our two children are four and a half years apart in age. Because of the timing of their birthdays, they were five grades apart. This meant that our family was enrolled in a Catholic K-8 for fourteen years - five years when both children attended and nine years when only one attended. The current annual tuition at Saint Martha School is \$4,700 for one child, \$7,000 for two or more. For our family - and assuming no increases in tuition and ignoring various fees and miscellaneous expenses - that would mean a total cost of \$77,300 to send two children to elementary school (add some tuition increases and fees, and you'd be well past \$80,000). And we're charging that amount in a region where the public schools have a fine reputation and are, of course, free.

As I have said before, this is not a winning hand. A host of other expenses compete for priority in family budgeting. Lansing Catholic High School tuition often lies in the future, and nearly all our parents assume that substantial university expenses will follow after that.

You know that the school suffers from low enrollment. We have about half as many children as we once did, and some of the upper grades are quite small. Yet this has happened at the very time when the secular culture is in free fall and a Christ-centered education thus is more important than ever. More than ever, our confused and angry world needs peace, virtue, and simplicity of life. And it needs young leaders who appreciate the value of clear thinking, rigorous analysis, and a respectful hearing for the great writers and scholars of every age. Most of all, the world needs Jesus.

Come to morning Mass some day when the school is in attendance (usually Friday morning). You'll be lifted up by the energy, the life, the power of young witness. We know that, without a healthy school, a parish soon goes the way of so many others - perhaps it survives a few more decades, but the hair is gray and the pace is gingerly.

Here and there across the country, there are interesting solutions. The Diocese of Wichita is a place where Catholic schools are supported by the parishes. Closer to home, Saint Ann School in Cadillac has charged \$0 tuition for almost twenty-five years. We obviously can't do that. Plus I wouldn't want to, even if we could. Tuition serves a number of purposes, including assuring significant buy-in ("skin in the game") on the part of families who enroll. Personally, I don't think \$0 would be the best tuition, even if a parish could afford it.

As a parish concerned for its own well-being, we need to provide strong support for all our ministries, from the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, to the quilt ministry, to the music ministry, to religious education, to everything we do. And the school is another ministry of the parish, one that brings in the lifeblood of the parish - young families.

As of December 21, 2018, Saint Martha Parish is free of all debt. We have a few dollars in the bank, and we intend to keep those dollars for a rainy day. A thirty-year parish in a community like Meridian Township should have substantial savings, and I hope we can get there before too many more years. As we work on that, the parish has to get younger, and it has to grow its school.

For all these reasons, we are significantly lowering tuition, down to \$1,000 per student for Catholic families. But when we lower tuition, we still need to balance the budget and pay our bills. With the finance council we have looked at this for several months. The bottom line is that we can reduce tuition if we are able to watch spending closely and continue the modest increases we have seen in Offertory over the past couple years. We also will be expanding the scope of the school auction (the principal fundraiser for the school), inviting school parents and others to prayerfully consider making deductible contributions that account for the full cost of education, and working with a University of Dayton program that can subsidize the cost of our teachers. This will work. The Lord's loving protection of this parish is expressed in many ways, not least in the weekly and monthly generosity of our talented parishioners.

We are not doing this alone. Father Mark Rutherford's Saint Mary Parish and School in Williamson is likewise reducing tuition to \$1,000. Lest rumors start, let me be clear that we are and will continue to be two separate parishes with separate schools and separate curricula (although the two schools may continue to sponsor some joint sports teams, till each grows large enough to have its own).

As I have said, a Catholic parish needs a vibrant school in order to refresh and renew itself. Young families are our lifeblood. And, at this time of great challenge in our society, we need to provide an affordable option for academic excellence, growth in virtue, and daily encounter with our Risen Lord.

A Catholic education has always been the product of generous parishioners providing support to all parish ministries, including the school. As parishioners (including school parents) "pay it forward," we make possible a Catholic education for a new generation of Catholic leaders, just as so many of us once benefitted ourselves.

May God bless you!

Yours in Christ,

Fr Mike

Father Mike Murray