

# Blessed Junipero Serra Parish

## A Catholic Faith Community

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June 28, 2009

My Dear Parishioners,

The Feast of Blessed Junipero Serra, July 1<sup>st</sup>, marks the first anniversary of my appointment as your pastor. I arrived in town July 8<sup>th</sup> and was installed as pastor by Bishop Wilkerson on the thirteenth. This year has passed by quickly! In preparation for my second year, I would like to do some visioning with you. This sharing is motivated by a desire to share my thoughts with you as well as a hope to enlist your cooperation in a variety of initiatives.

This parish is under the pastoral care of the Congregation of St. Joseph. If you witnessed Bro. Joshio's renewal of vows, you heard that he vowed poverty, chastity and obedience in order to be free **for the service of youth**. That is the main charism and apostolate of the CSJ. About twenty years ago, the Superior General at the time wrote a letter describing a Josephan parish as one "where every young person finds a home." Father Serra needs to be such a parish. This is the motivation for:

- Naming Priscilla Campos *Coordinator of Youth Ministry and Confirmation Preparation*
- Sending several teens to training as peer ministers in youth ministry
- Launching our parish youth ministry program this Fall
- Ongoing efforts at improving Religious Education and sacramental preparation including recommitment to constructing proper classrooms as soon as feasible
- Support of our young people involved as Altar Servers, Ushers, choir members, etc.
- Continuing the Children's Liturgy of the Word at the 9:30 Mass
- Ongoing efforts at strengthening the Catholicity of Mission Bell Preschool
- Recommitment to the plans for a youth center and sport facilities as soon as feasible

Ten years ago the Vatican insisted that the catechetical thrust in every parish should be towards adults rather than children. This was a surprise to most of us because the lion's share of our effort has usually gone towards catechizing children and teens and preparing them to receive sacraments. To begin to address this call from the Church, the position of Coordinator for Adult Religious Education has been created. Judy Hibbs, who has been team-teaching RCIA with her husband John, has been hired to this part-time position. She will be my liaison with the various adult groups in the parish and a team-member with Lori Bustos, Coordinator of Religious Education, and Priscilla Campos in the Faith Formation Department of the parish. A new adult ongoing learning program is being created that will welcome a wide spectrum of our adult community. Kay Harter and other parish catechists are putting this program together. It is envisioned as a series of mini-courses. Details will be forthcoming. I plan to offer days of reflection for the various ministries of the parish during the upcoming year.

Social justice is a constitutive dimension of our Catholic faith. Most of us are much more comfortable with charity than we are with social justice, but we need to commit ourselves to learning more about and to taking positive steps towards works of justice. *Get on the Bus* has elements of social justice because it insists that parental rights and roles are not simply erased by incarceration. *Treasure Chest*, a program where people buy a week's supply of food for \$30, is being coordinated by our parish Knights of Columbus Council. This is in addition to our support—providing meals and monetary contributions—of the food program at St. Vincent de Paul in Lancaster. As a parish we also financially support *Together in Mission*, *AV Pregnancy Counseling Center*, and *Antelope Valley Transitional Housing*, part of Catholic Charities. I have reminded Religious Ed. and

Confirmation Prep. of the need to weave social justice instruction and experiences through every level of the programs.

Rapidly growing communities, as any living organism, experience growing pains. Our parish family is no exception. The Renew Group has accepted a leadership role in establishing welcoming experiences and materials for folks new to the parish. Please look for announcements in the Sunday bulletin. Also take personal responsibility to greet those whom you do not yet know—"people have entertained angels unwittingly through hospitality!" I have also scheduled some social and/or spiritual events for which I will need committees to coordinate them. They include:

- Parish Picnic at a Park October 17, 2009
- Ecumenical Prayer Service & Reception November 24, 2009
- New Year's Eve Dinner Dance for couples December 31, 2009
- Valentine's Dance for couples February 14, 2010
- Volunteer Appreciation Dinner May 21, 2010
- Corpus Christi Procession and sidewalk chalk art June 6, 2010
- Feast of the Sacred Heart Exposition of The Blessed Sacrament between the two daily Masses June 11, 2010

Confirmation also plans two dinner fund-raisers for which help would be appreciated. They are a spaghetti dinner November 15, 2009 and a Lenten Friday dinner February 26, 2010. If you'd like to lead or help on a committee for the bulleted items, contact me. If you can lead or help on a committee for the confirmation fund-raising dinners, contact Mrs. Campos.

Our parish formulated a *Master Plan* shortly after the parish was founded August 15, 1987. Very wisely, City permits were sought then for the various phases of the plan which will expedite future building projects. A great deal has changed over those years. It is worth taking the time to see if what made sense then still makes sense today regarding what to build and where to build it. After Labor Day, I hope to announce the process we will follow for review of the *Master Plan*. Once we affirm, amend or radically change plans, then we will work on a timeline for realizing the next building projects.

Our final loan payment for the land along Avenue M has been made. We are totally debt-free. We have the good administration of Fr. Ernest and Jean Vensel to thank for this blessing. While continuing to save as much for the building fund as possible, this fiscal year we will also concentrate on maintenance of the existing facilities. Twenty years takes a toll on buildings and their fixtures. I believe that people will be more generous on future capital campaigns for new construction if they recognize that we at the helm are able to balance saving money and wisely spending money on upkeep. As I mentioned before, I have tremendous confidence in the intercession of St. Joseph for monetary and practical concerns. St. Joseph along with a good business manager and finance council, which we have, are a dynamite combination!

I am regularly asked what I "think about a school" here at Blessed Junipero Serra. I am convinced that a good Catholic parochial school is the best means for passing on the faith to the next generation. So from that point of view, I would love to have a school. I also feel very strongly that a parochial school, to be true to this uniquely American model of Catholic education, needs the full support of the parish so as to make tuition affordable to all in the parish. This would require commitment to some sort of tithing program by all in the parish. I refuse to build a Catholic private school affordable to only a tiny percentage of our families. Nevertheless, there will always be some children who find their educational needs better served in the public schools. Those children must be provided the best catechetical program possible and never allowed to feel "second class" parishioners especially in sacramental preparation. In this age of networking and clustering of pastoral efforts, full cooperation would be necessary on the part of all three parishes in the Antelope Valley before a new Catholic school could be built. We currently have the only Catholic parish pre-school—should we make early childhood education and day care our niche? Would a new school be another K to 8 School or a Middle School? If the latter, would the other parish schools transfer those upper grades here and increase the number of sections for the lower grades thereby allowing more of our children to attend? What sort of partnership could we form with Paraclete High School? Many unanswered questions...

Regarding my signing applications for students going to Paraclete to receive the \$500 Catholic tuition reduction, the following will be the policy for those starting high school in the 2010-2011 academic year:

- The student must have been enrolled in Religious Education here, or in a Catholic grade school, in 8<sup>th</sup> grade—in subsequent years, they must have attended both 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades here, or in a Catholic grade school, and have received First Holy Communion before starting high school
- Ninth and tenth graders must be active in our Confirmation Preparation Program
- There must be evidence of regular Mass attendance—even a nickel in the envelope will provide a paper trail through the computer

Next year I will not automatically sign letters of recommendation to attend any of the various *Christian* high schools here in town. It seems that the curriculum is not only in support of Reformation theology, which is totally understandable, but also critical of Catholic faith and practice. This latter piece troubles me greatly since it puts the student's Catholic Christian faith at risk and shows no sense of ecumenical cooperation or sensitivity. One should think that in the Third Millennium Christians could share their faith on its own merits rather than cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Christianity of other believers. Any exceptions to my reluctance to complete the recommendation form would be based on the student's participation in religious education and Sunday Mass here at the parish.

Starting with July 2009, baptismal preparation classes will be offered every two months. One Sunday each month we will baptize children at the Sunday Masses, except during lent. Children who have celebrated their 7<sup>th</sup> birthday must attend RCIA adapted for children (or teens as the case may be) before being baptized. As I write this letter, we are very close to finishing our calendar for the next fiscal year. This will be published online—check the posting date on the calendar to be sure you have the most recently updated version of the calendar should any questions arise.

This year has provided many learning experiences—thank you for your patience with my learning curve. I am such a lucky priest—to be pastor of a parish with so much going for it; most especially the fine people who call it their spiritual home! I have felt very welcomed and loved since my first day here. Obviously, it WAS the Will of God that I move here. It seems that we were waiting for each other. God willing, we will enjoy many more years together working on the continuous unfolding of the Kingdom of God.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Fr. Leo A. Dechant, C.S.J., D.Min.  
Pastor