



SAVE OUR CHURCHES ASSOCIATION

2913 – 31 Avenue South, Lethbridge, Alberta T1K 1M4

SOCA UPDATE for September 11, 2017 Day 2191 of the Closure of St. Patrick's Church (6 years and 43 days)

Dear SOCA members and friends,

WHAT IS "COMMUNITY"?

Krystyna Higgins, who lives in Fredericton N.B., is a freelance Catholic writer/editor, collaborative pianist and liturgical musician. She is a regular contributor to Living With Christ and contributed the reflection on the readings for Sunday September 7, 2017 on p.486 of the Sunday Missal booklet that we use in our parish. In her reflection, she says that the readings for that Sunday suggest something about the difficulties of building and sustaining community.

Her reflection led me to recall the three parish communities that we had in East Lethbridge. Though not perfect, they were cohesive units and functioned remarkably well as separate entities. The parish communities of Assumption, St. Basil's and St. Patrick's functioned independently of each other and had their own distinct characteristics but worked reasonably well together when the need arose for collaborative action. In 2000, we learned that Assumption and St. Patrick's were to be twinned because of the shortage of priests and for administrative efficiency. Parishioners of the two churches did not take kindly to the merger but by and large cooperated with Pastor Tim Boyle. Likewise in 2005, the parishioners of St. Basil's had no choice but to accept the merger with Assumption and St. Patrick's under the umbrella of the new All Saints Parish. They recognized that the Pastor was only carrying out the orders of his Bishop.

In 2006, parishioners learned that there had been a hidden agenda all along for the mergers: the plan was to sell the three church buildings and replace them with a large 1,500-seat (later scaled down to 1,200) church. There were widespread protests, three separate petitions (each with hundreds of names) and scores of letters sent to Bishop Henry. To no avail. Three fairly happy parish communities disintegrated basically into two factions, those who were for a new church and those who wanted to retain the three churches. In several cases, even families were split on the issue.

Naturally those who sided with the Pastor and Bishop became the "winning" group while those who opposed the sale of the three neighbourhood churches were dismissed as "a small group of dissidents." The Bishop set the tone by flatly stating that "The *status quo* is unacceptable." Why was it unacceptable? Other dioceses around the world have found ways to keep their local churches going even where population growth or other factors made it necessary to build new churches. Was it necessary for East Lethbridge to lose three thriving parishes to make a single-minded Bishop's dream of building large churches possible? Of course not.

Since February 2007, when the proposal to sell three churches and build a new church was announced, East Lethbridge has been a fractured community. There are people who find it difficult to

extend the hand of peace to me during Mass just because I am a SOCA member. When I attend Pastoral Advisory Council (PAC) meetings, the hostility is palpable and people whom I have known for years, look away rather than greet me.

At the end of the May 17, 2017 PAC meeting, Father Kevin led a group activity with the following topic for discussion: "What is the #1 issue for the Church in Southern Alberta? How can the Bishop help us with this?" One group reported that the #1 issue, *the #1 issue, mark you*, is: "the division in the parish due to SOCA. They receive recognition and a voice. Why are they a recognized group when they exist contrary to the Parish mandate?"

The fact, of course, is that SOCA was not formed until June 25, 2011 whereas the division in the parish began when the PAC made the recommendation in 2007 to the Bishop to sell three churches and build a new church. It's easy to make SOCA the scapegoat for the division because the uprighteous folk in the PAC at that time surely couldn't have caused the division, could they? As SOCA's plea to save our churches was not entertained by the Bishop, the Pastor and the PAC, it effectively means that from 2007 onwards, hundreds of parishioners became disenfranchised. Not satisfied with that, there are now those that would like to place a gag order on us. Is that a sign of a Christian community? As parishioners, do we not have the right to express our views?

We were told that one of the major reasons for building a new church was that we would be able to worship under one roof. Since when did that become a prerequisite for a Christian community? I think Father Kevin was much closer to the truth at a Funeral Mass on September 5, 2017, when he stated, "We may not be sitting in the same pew but we are all connected by our faith." Yes, indeed, we are connected to our brothers and sisters in every pew, in every church, in every land. When we sing "We are many parts, we are all one body," we are celebrating our oneness in the Lord. How can we sing, "Christians let us love one another, As we share the true living bread," and yet find it difficult to extend the hand of peace to others? Is it any surprise that teenagers get turned off organized religion when they see a huge divide between what we profess and what we practice? It's all very well to sing out in full voice

"And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love."

But do our words and actions reveal a different reality?

Sixteen years have passed by today since the horror of the terrorist destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and the attack on the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001. In the Middle East we see the misery and bloodshed that has been caused by Islamic State. The fabric of communities is pretty shredded around the world by people who believe that they and only they are right and those who disagree with them have no right to speak. Krystyna Higgins ends her commentary with these wise words:

"Living in our various communities will never be easy. Let us pray for the grace to discern God's presence at the heart of those communities, encouraging and supporting us in our struggles to love our neighbour as ourself (*sic.*)."

Francis Noronha, Secretary of SOCA, Procurator

cc Very Rev. Kevin Tumback, Pastor; Rev. Lukas Drapal, Associate Pastor; Philip Gray, JCL; Aaron Skretting, Chairman, PAC