

Dear Parishioners of Saint Mary's Church,
Parents of Saint Mary's School Children,
Benefactors, Supporters, and Friends of St. Mary's,

It is with a heavy heart that I write this letter, but I feel that now is the time to break the news. There have been many rumors circulating not only in our own parish school, but throughout other Lincoln parishes concerning the possible, even likely consolidation of one or more of our city's Catholic schools, including Saint Mary's. The good news is that Sacred Heart, St. Patrick's and Blessed Sacrament Schools will remain open in the foreseeable future—due in large part to an anticipated influx of students from Saint Mary's. However, it has become apparent, for a number of different reasons all of which are coming together and leading to one conclusion, that it is time for Saint Mary's School to consolidate with neighboring schools and end independent operations as our own parish school in our building downtown. I need to make it clear that this applies only to the school, not to the parish. St. Mary's Church will remain open, and will continue serving the sacramental needs of both our parishioners and of people throughout the city of Lincoln.

I understand that this is a major loss for our parish, our Catholic community, and for the city of Lincoln itself. Before any blame is leveled or criticism made, I would ask that everyone learn more about the reasons for the decision.

- 1) Due to the expansion of the city, and the shift in the demographic makeup of the neighborhoods which comprise our parish, Saint Mary's has become one of the smallest city parishes in number of overall households. We have a disproportionately large number of households headed by single individuals and many of these are on fixed incomes and / or government aid. It is simply not financially feasible for us to sustain school operations with our own parish resources.
- 2) The need for a parish school at Saint Mary's has dwindled dramatically over the last 20 years. Currently, only 25% of our student body (of approximately 125 students) actually reside within Saint Mary's parish boundaries. While we have received much outside help over the last 20 years, the responsibility for all the school expenses and the debts incurred as a result, remain ours.
- 3) It has become increasingly clear that, even with much outside help, more of the parishes in Lincoln were sliding into the same demographic and financial downturn that was being experienced at Saint Mary's. In the end, the conclusion reached was that one of the three schools certainly had to close in order to bolster the student population, and the influx of financial support, at the other remaining schools.
- 4) Saint Mary's was the logical candidate to consolidate for a number of reasons:
 - Our being situated between Sacred Heart and Blessed Sacrament parishes.
 - Our location downtown, which is great for many purposes, but not ideal for operating a school (located feet away from a major arterial, transient activity in basement of church which serves as our lunchroom).
 - Our lack of room for expansions or for improvements in the future.
 - The low number of parish families using the school relative to Sacred Heart and Blessed Sacrament.
 - The huge (\$1.3 million) operational debt which Saint Mary's has incurred by keeping the school open, and which must eventually be addressed by the parish.
 - The deteriorating physical condition of the school.
 - The inability to respond to other needs and demands of the parish.

Let me assure, this was not a sudden, quick, or easy decision on anyone's part. It was made carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully over a period of many years. But this decision is the same conclusion that has been reached by every objective consultant, taskforce, and committee which has examined our situation.

The closing has nothing to do with the quality of the education which has been offered at Saint Mary's, which I consider to be second to none in Lincoln. It is not due to any lack of generosity on the part of Bishop Conley or the Diocese of Lincoln; in fact, much money and a disproportionate amount of diocesan resources have been poured into our school to keep it open for the last 15 years. The commitment to quality, affordable Catholic education for all the faithful, regardless of ability to pay, remains a high priority. This consolidation, in fact, will allow us to expand that outreach to the poor, as it will result in more efficient and affordable operations.

Students who belong to Saint Mary's parish are NOT facing a future without a school. Because we will be supporting our neighboring schools, Saint Mary's will have seats in those schools proportionate to the student population

of our parish. Similar arrangements are to be made for the rest of our families from Cristo Rey, Immaculate Heart of Mary, and St. Andrew Dung Lac parishes. The pastors of those parishes, and I myself, will be visiting with our families, to ensure that each of our students will be placed in their new school and be ready to go by the beginning of the 2019/20 school year. Meanwhile, our parish will address the future use of the school building and property.

I want to thank: all those whose support (financial and otherwise) has allowed us to maintain this ministry for these last several years; our parishioners for their generosity and sacrifice; and our outstanding teaching and support staff. In particular, I wish to thank Dr. Nina Beck, whose expertise and leadership have been the hallmark of Saint Mary's School for years. In closing, I ask everyone to please remember: every time one door closes, another opens. I encourage our parishioners and school families, even though saddened about not having St. Mary's School after this school year, to look at this as a call to new opportunities and perhaps new ministries in the parish, and to meet the new people God is waiting to place in our lives.

Fr. Douglas Dietrich
Pastor, Saint Mary's Church
Chief Administrative Officer, Saint Mary's School