

May 22, 2023

Dear Parishioners

In August of 2022, Bishop Sullivan issued a Decree regarding changes in the Mass schedules for all the parishes of the Camden Diocese effective July 1, 2023. Bishop Sullivan's decision for parishes to decrease the number of Masses scheduled is primarily due to the lack of priests assigned to parishes and the limits to the number of Masses they can celebrate over a weekend. Bishop Sullivan also noted the decrease in attendance since COVID-19. He is concerned that parishes have focused on the quantity of Masses (that are not well attended) rather than the quality of the Masses.

In the Decree, Bishop Sullivan states the following:

Each parish with one priest is to schedule:

- **One Mass on Saturday evening**
- **Two Masses on Sunday**
- **Parishes that serve the Latino community should incorporate a Mass celebrated in the Spanish language into the parish Masses scheduled in accord with the guidelines above.**
- **For Parishes that have only one priest; the parish weekday Mass schedule may reflect the Pastor's day off by having no Mass scheduled on that day. When the pastor is on vacation, the weekday Masses may be suspended. Eucharistic Services are NOT TO BE CONDUCTED on these occasions.**

The directions of the Decree affect our Parish because I am the only priest assigned here. Presently we have the 4:30 p.m. Mass and 6:30 p.m. Mass (Spanish) on Saturday. Since July 2021, I have presided at both Masses on Saturday, as well as both on Sunday. Priests normally should not be presiding at four Masses on a regular basis. (I have presided at the 6:30 p.m. Mass in English – Deacon Pedro preaches in Spanish).

It has been a difficult decision on how to fairly resolve this situation. In some parishes of the Diocese, the Pastor made the schedule change without consulting parishioners. In contrast, I want to make sure that this difficult decision is made with as many parishioners being aware of what needs to be done, understand why it is happening, and be given the opportunity to provide input. During March, I surveyed 40 people that attend the 4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Masses. The responses did not give a clear sense of what was best for the parish.

During the weeks of May 6-7th and May 13-14th at each Mass, I asked anyone who was registered in the parish to fill out a form with their opinion on what is best for the new parish schedule on Saturday:

- **A Bi-lingual Mass to start between 5:00 – 6:00 p.m., with a committee that would ensure that the readings, music, and homily would be equal**
- **Or the Parish have only one Mass either English or Spanish only**

I thank the many parishioners who took the time to fill out the form. I needed to give primary attention to the forms of those who attend the 4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Masses. The response was varied; over 60% of those at 4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. did not want a Bi-lingual Mass. Those that did, asked questions about how many songs would be in their language and wanted most things in their language. They were very concerned that the Mass would not be in "their language" enough.

I spent time looking at Mass attendance over the past 6 months, as well as new family registrations. The following is what I have found.

Since November 2022, the average attendance on a weekend has been 360-425 people. This is down from 420-530 people in 2019. The average percentage attendance at each Mass was:

4:30 p.m.: 18% 6:30 p.m.: 33.5% 8:30 a.m.: 23% 10:30 a.m.: 25.5%

The majority of new family registrations over the past two years have been Hispanic/Latino families with at least one person who does not speak English well.

There are 70 children in the Religious Education Program; over 60% of the families are Hispanic/Latino with one parent that is not fluent in English

Seventy percent of the Baptisms in the past two years have been families where one parent and extended family are not fluent in English.

Many people attending the 6:30 p.m. Mass are travelling from lower Burlington County (Moorestown, Cinnaminson, Delran) because there are not many choices for Mass in Spanish.

Those who have attended the 6:30 p.m. have had to adjust to the fact that I am not fluent in Spanish. I say most of the Mass parts in English. The readings are in Spanish and Deacon Pedro preaches in Spanish. Some in the Spanish community have had to go to another church for Confession. I cannot not speak Spanish fluently enough to hear Confessions in that language.

There were people from both the 4:30 p.m. and 6:30pm Masses and other Masses that were willing to try the Bi-lingual Mass but had expressed various reservations and conditions. They didn't want the Mass time changed. They thought that the Bi-lingual Mass would be too long. Some didn't want the homily presented in both languages. My concern was that if there were a Bi-lingual Mass, it would not be what people wanted and slowly but surely, people would not attend.

I understand that people have strong connections to the Mass they have attended for many years. This has been a very difficult decision for me to make. However, after much prayer and reflection I have to consider what is best for our Parish over the long term.

Therefore, I am writing Bishop Sullivan that our new Mass schedule **beginning on July 1st-2nd will be:**

Saturday: 6:30 p.m. (Spanish)

Sunday: 8:30 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.

Confessions: Saturday 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. In English

Weekdays Masses: Mon. Tues. Wed. & Friday at 8:00 a.m.

I recognize that some of you may not agree with the changes. However, I ask all parishioners to pray to the Holy Spirit for understanding and acceptance of these necessary changes. Whether or not you are directly affected by the new schedules, I consider all of you as valued members of our faith community and I hope you continue to be active members as we move forward.

Sincerely

Fr. Ed Friel, Pastor