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Good Shepherd Church | Saint Stanislaus Church | Saint Anthony of Padua Church  
Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption

November 1, 2018  
*Solemnity of All Saints*

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

*May the Lord give you peace.* As I arrive in Fall River to take up his new mission to lead the Catholic Community of Central Fall River, I wanted to take a moment to introduce myself to all of you, and share a little bit about how I see the great faith adventure that lies ahead for us. My name is Fr. Tom Washburn and I am originally from New Bedford. I have been a priest for 18 years now serving in a variety of parishes large and small, urban and suburban. My ministry has always had a focus on the beauty of our liturgy and the ways we pray together, and ministry with youth and young adults. I have been involved in renewal efforts by the national and international leadership of my Franciscan Order.

First, I want to thank those of you who have already begun this journey of renewal and rebuilding. I realize that the situation has challenged you in ways that you didn't expect when you began this process. Your patience and understanding have been a blessing. I especially want to thank Fathers Deston, Johnson, Wilson, and Albino for their caring shepherding of each of your communities and for all the parishioners who have come forward to help lead this effort of renewal. You have already provided me with honest and candid advice and counsel; you give me great hope and optimism for the future of this new mission.

I want you to know how excited I am now to be asked by Bishop Da Cunha to come to Fall River and walk with all of you as we grow in our faith, and grow as a community. I know that there are a lot of challenges that we face right now. First and foremost is the care of all of the parishioners from the churches that are closing – St. Anne's, Holy Cross, and Holy Rosary; and for those from St. Bernadette's Church, which closed in August. We are one church and we look forward to your gifts being shared now in this new community.

But, I also want you to know clearly that, despite the loss we are feeling, I also believe that this is a great moment of hope. I believe this with all my heart, and said an eager yes to the Bishop because I treasure the opportunity to be part of this moment of renewal with you. There is a powerful scene in the movie *The Passion of the Christ* as Jesus is making His way to Calvary. Mary, His Mother, is matching Him step-for-step, her eyes never leaving her Son. Suddenly, Jesus stumbles to the ground; and in that moment, Mary when Her Son was young and stumbled and fell; as a child, she could easily make things better for Him. Returning to the present moment, before He is able to rise again carrying His heavy burden, the eyes of Mother and Son connect, and Jesus looking into the loving eyes of Mary says, **"BEHOLD, I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW."**

I was thinking of that beautiful moment because I am conscious that we – Catholics in central Fall River – are on the precipice of something new as we consider stepping out of what we've all known for so long into a new reality for our faith. With Jesus, our faith and our church will be renewed.

I come to you as a member of the Franciscan Order, and so I bring the heritage and spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi with me. The story of Saint Francis is well known, but let me reflect on one small part. In the year 1205, while praying in the small chapel of San Damiano, the saint miraculously heard the words of Jesus speak to him from the cross. Jesus said, **"REBUILD MY CHURCH!"** What many do not know about that

encounter is that Saint Francis initially misunderstood the mission that Jesus had given him. He thought it was about stone and mortar, and over the next few years, he physically rebuilt three churches before he came to understand that Jesus was calling him to the even bigger mission of rebuilding the church – not with stone and mortar, but with the living stones that are the true building blocks of the Church.

As we come together to form this new Catholic Community of Central Fall River, we too, can be tempted to think that the task before us is also about stone and mortar. And, as important as our spiritual homes are, the Holy Spirit is calling us today to engage in a process that looks not only at the Church today, but the Church tomorrow. We are being called again to rebuild the living stones of the Church into a structure that will carry our vibrant faith to future generations. This new Catholic Community of Central Fall River will unite the living stones in our city to build the most vibrant Catholic community possible to strengthen the proclamation of the Gospel now and for decades to come. Near the end of his life, Saint Francis encouraged his followers, “**LET US BEGIN AGAIN.**” I encourage us all to take up his words and begin again today to rebuild the living stones of the faithful in the City of Fall River into a strong Church for the future.

This moment comes down to one simple reality – **WE NEED EACH OTHER.** To carry our faith forward, this moment isn’t about what makes us different, or past hurts and wounds. It’s about what unites us – our common faith, our common membership in the family of God, and our common desire to see the Catholic faith thrive in the city of Fall River. To be successful, this must be a process of sisters and brothers coming together to renew the faith because we recognize that **THERE IS NO “US AND THEM”**. There is only US. Our future will only be successful if we step into that future together.

And if there is no “us” and “them”, then we must seek to discover **THE NEW “WE.”** Who are “WE” to be as the Catholic Community of Central Fall River? How can our common identity be a source of renewal for our city? What unique gifts do each of us bring to this new community that can enrich the whole? Let us join together in the discovery of who we can be together as we make these first steps into our new common future. **WHO SHALL WE BE?**

I so look forward to getting to meet and know each of you, as well as the beautiful heritage of each of our communities. My sisters and brothers, do not be afraid of what lies ahead because finding the new “we” will be an exciting process. Just look around at the living stones that we will use to build this new community – we are an exciting, talented, diverse, and holy group of wonderful, faithful people. Who “we” can be together is full of so much possibility. And that should make us feel made new again, as Jesus promised.

Let me end with a quote from the end of a favorite Walt Whitman poem, *O Me! O Life!*:

*“The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?  
The Answer: That you are here—that life exists and identity,  
That the powerful play goes on, **and you may contribute a verse.”***

My friends, let us beg the grace of the Holy Spirit for the inspiration to do our part to let God create something new in and through us for the good of our future. Let us together contribute our verse. Let us hear the words that Jesus spoke to Francis as He speaks them now again to us and rebuild the church – not with stone and mortar, but with living stones – built of you and me; built of love and kindness; compassion and mercy; healing and holiness and strength. Let’s build this together.

May God bless you.

Peace, prayers, in Christ’s love,



Rev. Thomas Washburn, OFM