



Saint Barbara Parish at Old Mission Santa Barbara

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“Lord, let me look upward into the towering oak and know that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and well.”

(from a prayer by Orin L. Crain)

Dear Friend,

On a recent Saturday morning I came across the words printed above, and my response was immediate. I stood up, walked out of the room, and got myself over to the massive Moreton Bay fig tree, planted by the friars 130 years ago in the center of the Mission Cemetery. It wasn't an oak, but I needed perspective and the Lord was providing. Sure enough, as I looked upward into that tree and thought about the parish, Mission Santa Barbara, and the stresses and blessings of the last six months, everything got clearer.

In their year-end report for June 30, the Finance Council wrote me the following: *“There were two big stories this fiscal year. One was obviously the pandemic. The other was the progress that had been made before the pandemic hit.”* So, here's what became clear first: the generosity of parishioners last fall in response to a clear outline of our financial need, and the offer of a challenge gift, braced us for the onslaught of the pandemic storm we never saw coming. And here's the surprise: those contributions — plus a sharp increase in on-line donations, and a reduction in expenses — allowed the parish *to end the year with a small surplus for the first time in five years.* Our tree is still standing!

From a pastoral perspective, the rich soil of prayer, devotion, and study has also played its part. During the months-long unavailability of the Eucharist, I have observed a holy hunger. I've witnessed the patience of adults and children who, after months of preparation, waited additional months for their baptism, confirmation, and first communion. Meanwhile, our online adaptation of liturgy and the work of volunteers re-gathering us finally for Mass in church and on the steps, along with the prayer of the “outreach angels” — all of it has been keeping our roots alive. Our faith formation and the dedicated work of family ministry were part of the same groundwork, as was our Advent retreat with Father Jude and Sister Pat. Our study of St. Junipero Serra led by Fr. Joe Chinnici; our on-going engagement with the Franciscan tradition — including our



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participation in the Mission speaker series addressing the history of race and ethnicity in California — all have provided lasting spiritual and intellectual sustenance.

Most important, all this energy has made our branches grow outward, like those of the fig tree. In volunteer service of all kinds, parishioners have managed to fan out across the city. Close to home, some are serving in the Mission's food distribution program and others at the Cordano Center, which has recently adapted its efforts through a mobile van. Our faith is extending us, like sinewy limbs, into ever more places of need.

With this picture of growth, blessing, and challenge comes the question of our future. Those who planted the fig tree 130 years ago had the same question. They were sent here not to found the Mission, but to *re-found* it. They had a vision: education, including a seminary; new ministries to immigrants and native people; eventually the need for historic and cultural preservation, and the establishment of parishes, like St. Barbara.


Today the friars, along with Mission and Parish leaders, are doing a similar work of re-founding, with added input drawn from the wider civic community. The goal: a vision and plan for the Mission's long-term sustainability. The task force is working in tandem with a development steering committee initiating fund-raising projects to meet the emergency and long-term needs that have intensified during the six-month shutdown. Keep in mind that the health and vitality of our parish and of the Mission are intertwined. We need each other.

Meanwhile, let me state it clearly: the generous response to our call for help last fall, including the extraordinary matching gift we received, positioned us to temporarily withstand the pandemic calamity — but not to repay temporarily-deferred obligations to the Archdiocese, nor to close the gap created by the loss of important collections — mostly cash — from tourists. (Our Easter collection came right in the middle of the shutdown and we realized only 50% of what we had anticipated.)

Last year the parish graciously responded to my invitation to consider a \$5 increase weekly from each household. Everyone gave what they could. This year we need that wonderful generosity to continue — and even increase. We confront continuing adverse financial circumstances...and we need your help.

I began this letter with a prayer to look up and observe a tree that has grown strong by growing slowly and well. That tree — its roots, branches, and sturdy trunk — is all of us. And it's more: in the Franciscan tradition, the tree of life is the cross of Christ, forming a new community of love, hope, joy, and service. As we embrace that cross as the body of Christ today, may the Lord give us peace!

Gratefully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "f. Dan. f." with a stylized flourish at the end.