

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We continue to live with the pandemic of COVID-19 and the unfortunate confusion that this microscopic virus has unleashed throughout the world. We are not seeing an end to this pandemic anytime soon, which means following continued protocols here in the parish and also with our Religious Education Program (REP).

Let me simply quote from Fr. Swamy Pothireddy, the new pastor at Sacred Heart Parish, as we worked together, along with the Diocese, on a difficult decision regarding REP.

From your conversations, emails, and letters, [we] understand your pain about the restructuring of our Religious Education Program (REP). This was not an easy decision for us pastors to make, and I am afraid there are a number of misconceptions circulating about changes made to the program. It is not Bishop Quinn's decision, rather it is the decision of both the pastors at Sacred Heart and St. Joseph, Owatonna in consultation with the diocese. I am hoping my letter can help clarify how REP will look going forward.

Please understand that we have not eliminated the REP in our parishes, but due to a combination of financial and personnel concerns—exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—we pastors came to the conclusion that continuing with the current REP/Youth program and board was simply not feasible. As you are aware, this situation presents many unforeseen challenges in regard to teaching religion and imparting faith to kids in the classroom. We believe that the restructured REP will allow us to continue the tradition of sharing the Catholic faith with our children but done in a way that we have the finances and resources to do so.

The new REP format will be as follows (please note that this is our current plan, but the plan could be modified if we pastors deem it necessary):

- There will no longer be a paid REP board.
- A part-time REP director will be hired to oversee the program.
- Children will receive Sacramental preparation for First Communion (2nd grade) and Confirmation (10th grade) in the classroom. We strongly feel this is the best way to ensure our children are properly prepared to receive the Sacraments.
- Children in other grades will receive their REP lessons through an online format (primarily email), and parents will be asked to share these lessons with their children. As I am sure you understand, religious education ideally should be rooted in the home, with families sharing in the faith together. What a beautiful way for our families to grow in their Catholic faith!

We pastors have thought and prayed over this matter and only then have we made this decision as we are really concerned about our kids receiving faith formation. During this tumultuous year, we must adhere to all the guidelines and follow all the directives to ensure the health and safety of our children, our staff, and our volunteers. We also have to use the available resources quite meticulously and responsibly because we simply don't know how this COVID-19 pandemic will affect our future. But, ultimately, our goal is to provide the best possible faith formation to our kids and youth, and we are working diligently to create a REP that can do just that within the parameters of our current situation.

Mrs. Jenna Sammon, the REP director of Christ the King Parish in Medford, will assist us this year only as REP coordinator.

I would like to thank all of you for your understanding, your prayers, and your love for Jesus and His Church. Be assured of my prayers for all of you!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. Jim Starasinich