

My Dear Friends,

As we approach the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mary Magdalene Church, I want to reflect on the path that has brought us here. We're in the midst of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, igniting their souls with the infectious love that inspired them to birth communities of believers that would carry the gospel message and values of Christ!! That same Holy Spirit has been instrumental in the life of Mary Magdalene Church every step of the way, and she guides us still!

While some have a hard time relating to the Holy Spirit, I find her to be the source of inspiration within us, and the more tangible parts of my spirituality. She was the divine spark deep in my soul, that whispered Mary Magdalene Church into my dreams and visions. When I doubted, She consistently blew lightly on the fledgling spark through experiences and people that (often unknowingly) confirmed the vision. However, from the beginning I knew that Mary Magdalene Church was not mine, it was "ours", even though I didn't yet know you. You see the Holy Spirit was the hunger within each of your souls that sent you on a spiritual quest and led you to Mary Magdalene, where you discovered that somehow you'd come "home." You've been an essential part of MMC even from its inception!!

From day one, I knew this dream was much bigger than me and that I couldn't do it alone. Whether you live in Rochester or not, whether you've graced our front door or you join us virtually, you are a vital part of who we are!!!

### **Where It All Began:**

We've come a long way since our inception!! While our journey began in June 2009 with Sunday night Masses at Mountain Rise Church in Fairport, we quickly discovered we needed to find a space to gather on Sunday mornings. This led us to our first real home- a former bank building just a few blocks from where we are now. We didn't even have money for chairs, so everyone brought their own: lawn chairs, folding chairs, and stacking chairs formed the congregation, and yet as soon as people walked through the doors they had a felt sense of the Holy Spirit. I often said "the other churches in town are jealous. They may have statues and stained glass windows, but we're the only church in town with a vault and a drive-up window!!!"



The drapery you see on the far wall, covered the drive-up but held the tabernacle!

### **Finding Our New Perch:**

In April 2013, we were invited by Trinity Lutheran Church to share space in our current location. A few months later Trinity Church disbanded and offered to sell us the church! *Was this the right decision for our small, young community?* To begin the discussion, in July 2015 we scheduled a quick meeting in the sanctuary immediately following Mass. Five minutes before Mass began, two mourning doves flew through the open doors into the sanctuary, and perched, one in the red front windows and the other on a banner that hung behind the cross,

where she looked over my shoulder as we celebrated the Eucharist!!!! It felt like the Holy Spirit was in the house! *How could we have any doubts?!*

### **Pulling Together & Reaching Out:**

We can all agree that these last few years have brought some challenges- the first of which was COVID, which affected every aspect of our daily life. But, just as on that first Pentecost, when it felt to the disciples like the world as they knew it had ended, the Holy Spirit sustained us. I've often said that the Holy Spirit knit us together virtually, long before the World Wide Web, and this time, at the point when we felt the most alone and separated from one another, the Holy Spirit actually used the internet to weave us together with people all over the country and beyond.

As a result, we were no longer physically confined by four walls!! Now people yearning for an authentic experience of the Holy within a community of love, where everyone is not only welcomed but celebrated, began finding us in new ways!! Unlike most churches which dwindled through Covid, we have grown and thrived!! That is because of YOU!!



Our pews are now full on Sunday mornings and the Holy Spirit is a palpable presence among us!

### **Going Forward:**

In 2022, I made the tough decision to retire. While traditionally the transition from the founding pastor to new leadership can be incredibly difficult, I knew that this community would not only survive but thrive, and this is due in large part to each and every one of you! The community came together to hire Rev. Lori Vail as our new full-time pastor, and her beautiful spirit and engaging homilies continue to inspire us all!! Whether you join us virtually or in person, your presence means the world to us, and you are a part of our community!

Now that I've retired, I get to experience Mass from the best seat in the house, amongst all of you watching the community that began with a tiny divine spark of inspiration deep in my soul begin to soar! That tiny spark has become a beautiful, loving, welcoming, inclusive community that reaches beyond our four walls. Recently a community member shared a beautiful metaphor with me. He acknowledged the divine spark of inspiration and vision, saying "Denise you acknowledge the divine calling that you felt, but you quickly say that Mary Magdalene Church's vibrancy is really about the community. And you're right about the significance of the community, but this is how I see it..." He continued to describe how the Holy Spirit blew that fledgling tiny spark into a fire. And then he said "The community members are now the individual flames that are part of that fire. Every aspect of this is important to keep the fire burning!!" I thank Mike for this beautiful vision!!!

Every single one of you, by offering your gifts, talents, skills, prayers and love help to not only sustain us, but keep us growing, glowing and loving!!! Every single day I thank God for the blessings that you bring to me and to our world!!

With love and deep gratitude

Bishop Denise Donato