

## FLAHERTY & CRUMRINE PREFERRED INCOME OPPORTUNITY FUND

To the Shareholders of Flaherty & Crumrine Preferred Income Opportunity Fund (“PFO”):

Despite general weakness in most fixed-income markets (e.g., investment-grade corporate bonds), attributable mostly to higher benchmark interest rates, preferred securities performed reasonably well on a relative basis. Total return<sup>1</sup> on net asset value (“NAV”) for the first fiscal quarter<sup>2</sup> was -0.5%, while total return on market price was -5.9%.

The U.S. economy remains on solid footing, with most economists forecasting faster growth in 2018. Inflation has remained in check thus far, and modest wage growth and strong business investment suggest that faster economic growth can be accommodated without the economy overheating. Faster economic growth combined with optimism around tax reform has caused interest rates to move modestly higher. Tax reform should be supportive of growth and investment, but much of it will be deficit-financed and could result in higher Treasury rates as government borrowing increases.

Investors often associate higher long-term interest rates with lower prices for preferred securities, and to some extent this is true. However, sensitivity of the Fund’s preferred portfolio to benchmark interest rates is much lower today than it was ten years ago. That is primarily attributable to larger holdings of fixed-to-floating rate securities relative to traditional fixed-for-life preferreds. Including these securities in a portfolio (~72% as of 2/28/2018) reduces sensitivity to benchmark interest rates. Moderate interest-rate sensitivity, along with a tightening of preferred credit spreads during the quarter, offset much of the weakness experienced by other fixed-income asset classes.

Most of the portfolio experienced credit-spread tightening as noted above, but one area of mixed performance was the energy sector, notably master limited partnerships (MLPs). The MLP industry appears to be in transition. The traditional MLP structure has struggled to meet investor expectations, leading some to collapse partnership structures into simpler organizations. Lower corporate tax rates from recent tax reform may accelerate that trend. While a simpler structure should benefit preferred investors over time, many MLPs issued preferreds in the last few months, causing yields to increase as concessions were offered to entice demand. Importantly, individual MLPs are in various stages of transition, and we remain comfortable with the level of MLP exposure in the Fund’s portfolio (~7.1% as of 2/28/2018). Many of the MLPs held by the Fund are among the strongest credits in the sector and a step ahead of peers in navigating these rough waters.

The Fund’s dividend rate was reduced during the quarter to reflect changes in interest rates and credit spreads that have cumulated over time. Tightening by the Federal Reserve has raised short-term interest rates and, therefore, leverage cost, while lower preferred yields have gradually reduced portfolio income. The investment objective of the Fund is to provide high current income consistent with the preservation of capital, and we believe the Fund will continue to meet that objective – although distributable income may be reduced as we proceed through this economic cycle. Fund shareholders have benefited from years of record-low interest rates and low leverage costs, but rates have moved up as the economy has improved. We believe the Fund’s strategy of investing in preferred securities and using leverage to increase income will continue to produce a competitive distribution rate for shareholders. We encourage shareholders to read the Fund’s 2017 annual report for a more-thorough discussion of this important topic.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the methodology required by the Securities and Exchange Commission, total return assumes dividend reinvestment.

<sup>2</sup> December 1, 2017 – February 28, 2018

Market volatility is likely to increase from record-low levels as we move into later stages of this economic cycle, but we believe preferreds will continue to offer competitive performance. Their combination of credit quality and yield (much of which is tax-advantaged) will be difficult to replicate in other fixed-income asset classes.

As always, we encourage you to visit the Fund's website, [www.preferredincome.com](http://www.preferredincome.com), for timely and important information.

Sincerely,

The Flaherty & Crumrine Portfolio Management Team

March 31, 2018