

Pastor's Pen: When the Water Rises (Learning to act as a parish)

Having grown up on the East Coast where tides on the ocean are a daily occurrence, one can sit on the seashore and notice the truth in the matter of the old saying, "When the water rises, all the ships go up." This phrase is used colloquially to say that when people act in mutual interest, everyone can benefit. Our ability to act as one is key to the success of any institution. It builds up them up because when each person looks to the good of each other, it builds the relationships that make the core strong.

A Member of the Body of Christ

In the Church Militant (the Church here on earth) we have over 1.1 billion members who are called to act in the mutual best interest of each other. Because Catholics have been willing to do such things over the millennia, institutions such as colleges, universities, hospitals, orphanages, and even unions, rose to help us help each other and those around us. In many places in this world, the Catholic Church is the only one running health care and education programs. We are the single largest giver of charity on the planet. It was that calling card of charity that gave witness to Christ and provoked non-Christians to conversion even when such conversion carried persecution and death.

We believe that, upon baptism, we are drawn into a single Body of Christ. This Body has a mission in which every single member shares. The central role of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This proclamation certainly comes through words. It also comes through deeds. Our willingness to engage in the care of the sick, the abandoned, the imprisoned, the needy, the lost, and otherwise hurting is part of that proclamation of the Gospel. Our willingness to educate anyone regardless of socioeconomic condition is also part of that proclamation of the Gospel!

Everything we do within the Church is to build up our collective ability to discharge the duties of the Body of Christ. That we have sacraments is so that we are given the necessary grace to discharge these duties, for it is by the hand of God and not merely our own, that the proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed can take place. When you were baptized or had your children baptized, this is what was committed to before God.

Autoimmune diseases

This great promise is stymied when we acquire an autoimmune disease within the Body of Christ. An autoimmune disease is where the body is fighting against itself and destroying itself in the process. Throughout the entirety of Christianity these diseases have come in the form of heresies and schisms sometimes. Certainly these heresies and schisms are cancerous to the body. But these are not the most common autoimmune diseases within the Body of Christ.

What is the biggest? There are a couple of them that plague most parishes. They are rooted in sin. The two I have noticed in 20 years of priesthood are the autoimmune diseases bound in sloth, greed, and wrath. The diseases around sloth always take on a flavor of 'someone else can do it' or

some other excuse to not give of one's time, energy, or resources. The diseases surrounding greed always take on the visage of 'I have to take of me' or other excuses why one's own lifestyle is more important than what is needed by others. The diseases surrounding wrath are all variations of 'I can't forgive...' , be it a cleric or lay person. Wrath closes the heart to the needs of others.

On top of these is one other, a venomous snake of a creature; tribalism. This one makes me crazy. It is when I identify myself not as a member of the Body, but as separate tribe within the Body. These will look to the interest of their group and other groups have to fend for themselves. They will give for the things that pertain to them. The giving of time, talent, and resources is a matter of what benefits their tribe.

As a pastor who has had parishes with schools, the most potent tribes are those based on where their children/grandchildren go to school. These false divisions are maddening. As a pastor, I am pastor of two parishes: one in Boonville and one in Fayette. There are no other parishes. I don't have a parish where the kids go to parochial school, another parish where the kids go to public school, another parish where the kids are homeschooled, and yet another parish where the kids are grown. I don't have a parish where I have a subset of indentured servants (aka school families) who must for the duration of their children's stay in the school must do the lion's share of the work because most of our budget is tied up in the school.

Part and parcel to the mission of a parish is the education of its youth. Whether that is done within a parochial classroom, a PSR classroom, a confirmation class, or other venues, it is core to who we are. Without the investing of our time, energy, and energy in this duty, we cut off our own future. Whether that education comes in classrooms or other youth activities, we are utilizing the mission to form disciples. We are in this together.

When the Water Rises

It is in our collective best self-interest to see that each member is giving of their time, energy, and resources as their health allows. We can have neither those who use the systems available to take advantage of the charity of others nor can we have those who begrudge being charitable. The more that we see each other as compatriots the better off we are. The better we do this, the more attractive we become because in doing so, we are showing forth the visage of Jesus Christ. The more we learn the importance of serving rather than being served, the more Christ-like we become.

I have compared my calling as a pastor to that of a coach. When we win...we all win. To win, though, requires everyone giving their best. No team will succeed with internal fighting when the fostering of tribes occurs. The more we cooperate and give of ourselves, the more the water goes up for everyone. I coach to win. I do because Christ does. Perhaps this is why He prayed "Father, may they be one as You and I are one" (John 17:21) and charged His disciples to mimic Him when He said, "Anyone who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first must serve the needs of all. The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve." (Mark 10:43-44) The more each of us can do this, the more the water rises for us all in the parish!