

Pastor's Pen: There is no such thing as free

I will often use a line from the movie, "The Princess Bride," "You keep using that word, I do not think it means what you think it means." In our society, a word poorly understood is the word 'free.' Most people use this word to mean they are getting something that has no cost. This is incorrect. What is actually meant is that someone else had paid the cost for a good or service. Within a parish, there is no function that is without cost. Everything we do costs someone time, energy, and resources. Last week, in the Pastor's Pen, I wrote about how when we all chip in it is to the benefit of the whole. When the water rises, all the ships go up. This week, I wish to reinforce this sentiment with its complementary truth.

By the grace of God and the Goodness of Others

Our entire faith as Catholics is built upon a simple premise: God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He sends His Son to restore what we could not restore on our own: the eternal relationship with God. He does this because He loves us. Some will say His love is free, but be aware that the cost of His love, expressed on the Cross, was anything but free. It cost God so that we didn't have to pay a debt we had no means to ever pay.

That love becomes the prototype for our action as Catholics. In imitation of Christ, we offer up a comparatively miniscule sacrifice when put next to Christ. In our sacrifice of time, energy, and resources, we mimic the generosity of God. This gift enables us to get about the mission of the Church, both in the proclamation of the Gospel by word (education, worship, formation) and deed (charity, tending to the needy, imprisoned, homebound, ill, hurting). The scope of what any parish or diocese can do is facilitated or impeded by how well each member gives of their time, energy, and resources. Our parishes and dioceses rise and fall on the grace of God and the goodness of others.

Sacrifice and Offerings

In the Old Testament, there are two categories of sacrifices. The first is the sin/peace offering. It is done to bind a covenant or as an act of repentance for sin. This involved the slaughter of the best of one's herds or flocks. One was compelled to eat a portion of this sacrifice so that one could receive the benefits of the sacrifice. This sacrifice ended with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, which takes its place for the rest of time. We participate in this sacrifice every time we go to Mass. We partake in the sacrifice of the Cross in the reception of Communion, reminding ourselves of what Jesus said in "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life within you." (John 6:53) Willfully absenting oneself when one can go to Mass, is seen as a supreme act of pride; essentially saying I do not need what Christ gives on the Cross!

It is the other sacrifice that is pertinent to this column: the thanksgiving sacrifice. This is also known as the tithe. It was the offering of the first fruits of one's labor. It was a show of understanding of God's goodness to the person. In thanksgiving, this sacrifice was made for two reasons. First it was to enable the work of those who were to serve God and toward worship. Second, it was to be used to help the poor, the widow and orphan, and the stranger in the land.

To the first end: the tithe is what sustains the parish in all of its endeavors. Because in the duties to worship, educate, and form our parishioners, the necessity of staff (pastor, teachers, administrators, etc.), buildings (brick and mortar structures, insurance, utilities), and materials (books, learning materials, etc.) all become necessary. The quality and depth to which any parish can go is either facilitated by the generosity of her parishioners or is hamstrung by the lack of generosity. This isn't just a matter of money, but of time and energy as well. Volunteering is so very necessary to the good of the parish and all its entities. Our ability to provide quality education and formation from cradle to grave, to keep up on the parish structures, and provide for the good of our employees all hinge upon our willingness to tithe.

To the second end: the tithe is also to provide assistance to those in need. Part of this is done through a variety of collections for those in need both local and afar. Part of this comes from our cooperation with missionaries who visit our parish looking for assistance. Part of this is making sure that those in need in our own parish are attended to with care and compassion. The latter part of this can be done through visiting our ill, homebound, and our parishioners in nursing homes and hospitals. The latter part of this can be done in making sure that help is available to the grieving and those whose lives have been upended. Part of our task is to make sure no parishioner falls through the cracks.

A Sacrifice of Prayer

Part of this sacrifice of time and energy comes in the form: most necessary form of prayer. We must pray for the good of our parish, our diocese, and our universal church. So many will complain, even justifiably, about their fellow parishioners and about their clergy as if this is what their offering to the parish is to look like. All good in our parish will start with prayer. Prayer is not what we do when all else fails, it is where we start. For some, especially our ill and elderly, it is the most important thing they offer the parish. All of us, though, have an obligation to intercede for the good of our parish.

Between You and God

What the tithe looks like is not my call as a pastor. I could give you a percentage (7-8%), but that is as far as I will go. I do not look at giving records. Your tithe is between you and God (and the IRS if you deduct). My responsibility as a pastor is to make sure that I give of my time, energy, and resources and to use wisely the time, energy, and resources you give. While you are answerable before God for what you give, I am responsible before God for what I gave and how I used what you gave.

My own priorities are going to be making sure that we can pay bills, upkeep the property, and invest in those areas important to the building up of our parishes. While my emphasis is not exclusively our youth, a great deal of it is. I want to make sure every parishioner has the access they need, but the formation of our youth is very near to my heart. I want to have it so abundantly clear to an outsider looking at us that we get how important following Christ is and we are willing to show that understanding by how we treat our parishioners and how we do outreach beyond our church walls. It isn't cheap; it certainly isn't free. However, out of God's abundance we have received. Out of discipleship to Christ, we are to mimic that same willingness to give.