

Pastor's Pen: Unaware, unwilling, or incapable

Last weekend many parishes were told of coming assignment changes for their clergy. For example, Fr. Basil will be heading into the Military Archdiocese to serve as a priest for the U.S. Military. Others found out that they will be receiving pastors from priests of other dioceses in the U.S. and from across the world. In this same time period, many parishes are tussling with reduced Mass schedules while others are looking at possible reductions in services altogether with some possible closures. These are difficult times in the diocese of Jefferson City.

Truth be told though, were it not for clergy from other parts of the US and from across the world becoming priests for this diocese or loaned to us from other dioceses, at no juncture in the history of this diocese would we ever have provided enough priests from our own parishes to serve our diocese. In short, in the 60 plus years of the existence of the diocese, we have never provided enough priests from our own ranks to serve this diocese. Never. That predates any and all scandals. That predates Vatican II.

To try to solve a problem, we must ask ourselves first whether the cause of the problem is a matter of people simply not knowing and acting out of that lack of knowledge, a matter of people knowing the problem and being unwilling to be part of the solution, or a matter of knowing the problem and simply lacking the capability to solve the problem. The lack of capability can either be an actual lack of capability or a learned helplessness. These criteria can also be used to face other problems that the parish has regarding Mass attendance and finances. ***The purpose of this pastor's pen is not to diagnose, but to ask needed questions and come up with appropriate solutions. We can win! We can get the vocations we need to expand our mission!***

Unaware

Sometimes we can be truly unaware of a problem. Many times it can lie below the surface and isn't known until an event takes place. For example, with many health issues we aren't aware of an internal problem that might well have been festering for a while until a major event like a heart attack or emergency room visit unveils it.

Sometimes the problem can be lying out in plain sight but goes largely unnoticed because we are distracted by the machinations of day-to-day life. Sometimes the problem grows so gradually as to not be noticed until it can no longer be overlooked. Sometimes the problem resides in the periphery and goes unnoticed.

An argument can be made that for many parishes, up till now, problems went largely unnoticed because services were not cut back and very few parishes closed. Each event that might have pointed to a larger problem was quickly adapted to by many. For example, when a parish lost its resident pastor and then that parish was now served by a pastor residing in another parish. A little uproar might have resulted, but things were adapted to fit the new reality. Maybe a parish received a priest from another area of the world. There was still a pastor, so that too was adapted. The problem underlying all of this

largely goes unnoticed or not talked about. Now that more serious discussions about cutting back Mass times, closing parishes, and such are happening, like a disease, the problem is no longer avoidable. To be unaware becomes a matter of willed ignorance.

Unwilling

Many times we are fully aware of a problem. We might look at it and get overwhelmed by the possible consequences. We might come to understand that the solution to the problem would require such a major shift in priority and activity that can we be unwilling to change behavior to counter the problem. We might well feel that if we postpone the necessary changes enough, that the problem will go away on its own. It is like the person who has champagne taste and a beer budget: they spend money they don't have on a lifestyle they cannot sustain hoping that some financial miracle (winning a lottery) might save them and allow them to pursue the destructive behavior.

There might be some who believe that priestly vocations are someone else's problem and that they have no stake in providing from themselves or their sons. As we have seen in the last 60 years, someone else's problem becomes our own. Unwillingness to fix a problem does not make the problem go away.

Incapable

There are times a person simply is incapable, especially on their own, of solving a problem. Incapability can come from fiscal, physical, or environmental limitations, to name a few. Sometimes the lack of capability is real and sometimes it is imagined; a result of learned helplessness. Many times a person might be paralyzed to inaction because they are overwhelmed by the problem. In these moments, the person must accept help from outside sources until the point where they are capable of correcting the problem in its totality.

Endgame

I believe that all three might be in play in our current longstanding vocation crisis. Some are unaware. Some are unwilling. Some are incapable. So what do we do?

For every vice, there is a corresponding virtue to combat it. At this juncture in our diocesan history we are incapable of solving this problem overnight; we must accept the help of other dioceses to supplement what the lack of native clergy has revealed. In the meantime, though, we must use this time to learn the necessary skills to not need this help in perpetuity. We must also be open to and take in the necessary information to dispel the effects of being unaware. Once the information is given and taken in, we will have to act upon it positively. This leaves the hardest of the three to overcome: unwillingness. We can possess the tools and knowhow to build something, but eventually we have to use the tools and get to building. If we are merely unwilling, then we will be consigned to destruction.

God gives the abilities and tools necessary to build His Kingdom and the workers necessary. We can't say it is His fault. We have no need to feel helpless; we have what we need to do what is necessary. We can do this...if we are willing to know, act, and get our priorities straight.