

Pastor's Pen: Beyond a Cultural Catholicism Part 3

Aside of God's love and God's grace, there is very little in life that is actually free. Usually when we say something is free, we are saying that I am not the one paying for it. When we get something for free, it is usually out of either the goodness of the heart of another or because one person's property was seized and given to another. While I do not wish to get into the latter of these methods, I do wish to get into the former: providing for another out of the goodness of one's heart. In Catholicism, in fact in the entirety of the Judeo-Christian religion, the providing for others out of the goodness of one's heart is seen as an act of thanksgiving to God; hence an act of worship of God.

In the Old Testament, this thanksgiving came in the form of the offering of the first fruits to God. This was called the Thanksgiving Offering. It was understood that one did not come before God empty handed or without thanksgiving at all, let alone when one was going to ask for things. To come in empty handed was to neglect the fact that God had been good to the person. As in our human relationships, when 'I want' or even 'give me' are frequent and 'thank you' is seldom if ever, it strains the relationship.

Why was the 'thank you' so important? It was because the 'thank you' enabled two major ministries to take place. First, it enabled the work of the priests and Levites to be done. As neither was allowed to own businesses or land because they were to be in the service of God and His people 24/7, part of thanksgiving was used to support those called to this service and to be used in the items and buildings necessary for the formal worship of God. The second ministry enabled by the thanksgiving offering was the care of the poor and needy. To ignore them, regardless of how they came to be in that state, was considered an affront to God.

Catholicism retained this thanksgiving offering for the very same reasons. It is for this reason that another precept of the Church is to contribute and support the mission and the work of the Church.

The Topic That Shall Not be Named

There are fewer topics people like talking about less than money. Many become indignant when a priest even mentions the word. In one parish I was assigned to pastor, I spoke of money reluctantly once a year. Usually it was because the collections were not keeping up with costs. I was accused by one parishioner of doing nothing but talking about money. Once. That is the threshold.

However, we use the collection for the very same reasons for which it was given. First, the collection goes to financing the mission of the Church in our parish and town. With what is taken up in collection I must do payroll (nobody is being paid what they could be in the private sector), utilities, insurance, items needed for the mission (bread, wine, textbooks, for example), upkeep and maintenance on buildings, educational activities, and so on and so on. All of these cost money. What can be done in a parish is often hamstrung by giving. People will complain we don't have this or that like other churches but not tithe like other churches demand, oftentimes as a condition of membership. Second, monies are collected to help those in need, both locally and across our country and world.

Pastors worry about such things. We have to. Bills have to be paid because nothing is free. In SS. Peter and Paul, we have roughly 625 registered families. Of those 625, only 540 even receive envelopes (86%). Of the 540 who receive envelopes, 110 do not use them at all. This means 31% of our parishioners give little to nothing. Loose collection only accounts for \$21,000 annually. Since we know visitors are accountable for a goodly section of this, even if a parishioner uses the loose collection instead of an envelope (and a few do), it comes to an infinitely small amount. Of the 540 who receive envelopes, another 38% give less than \$10 a week. I know some of these are fixed income and working poor. I am not naïve, though; I know some in this percentile are neither on a fixed income nor the working poor. I know there are those who extensively use parish programs who brag that they give nothing. Our annual budget is 1.4 million dollars. To brag that one gives nothing while demanding goods and services is unjust. It is an affront to the parish; it is an affront to God. The thanksgiving offering isn't a matter of giving the parish the money to pay bills; it is about supporting the mission of the Church. What a parish can do in regard to its mission is either facilitated or hamstrung by its members.

However, money is not the only matter in supporting the mission of the Church.

Giving of Your Life

Parishes also require time and energy to make them work. So many times the giving of that time and energy makes or breaks a parish. Catholicism is a hands-on type of religion. Our aid in furthering the mission of the parish by volunteering and aiding the poor and the needy is necessary. What am I talking about? I am talking about those who volunteer to teach non-parochial school classes, volunteer in the school, take communion to our home bound, look to the good of those in parish in need, help maintain the grounds, help in fundraisers, and work with our youth. It is also those who volunteer in our community with those in need. It is also those who step up to help with various needs during worship. It is also about cultivating an idea of service for the good of others.

The giving of one's time in support of the mission of the Church also speaks to priestly vocations and religious vocations. If we are reluctant to give of our time, energy, and resources, it slays vocations to the priesthood and religious life. If anything the parish asks for is seen as an unwarranted infringement on what I want (how dare the Church ask for money or for me to give my time!) it creates a culture where vocations will not grow. It is interesting to note that in the Diocese of Wichita (where our current bishop is from) that when a concerted effort was done to create a culture of giving and stewardship, that vocations to the priesthood and religious life greatly expanded. It makes sense.

Passing on our Heritage

We are the current caretakers of what was handed to us by our ancestors. What was handed on to us came at the sacrifice, hard labor, and generosity of them. Whether we hand on something stronger or weaker is all hinging on whether we see our role as parishioners as those being entitled to freebies or as those who are responsible for the investment placed in us. This precept of the Church (contributing and supporting to the Mission of the Church) reminds us of our duties. What we are as a parish is measured by how we pull this together.