

Pastor's Pen:

Creating a Strong Stewardship Parish: Hospitality

Last week, in the Pastor's pen, I wrote about what we are looking to bolster our parishes in order to become the centers of evangelization and charity that Bishop McKnight is encouraging us to be. I wrote about the four pillars of stewardship: prayer, hospitality, service, and formation. In last week's bulletin, I covered the foundation that is needed for the first pillar of prayer. This week, I am writing about the second pillar: hospitality. For us to be centers of evangelization and charity, we are required to extend a warm, hospitable, and loving welcome to all who join us.

You Are Welcome Here

These four words can be easily said. However, living them is a much harder thing to do. To make someone welcome (not merely feel welcome) means an opening of our hearts as a parish to make room for them. To make room for them is twofold. First, we give them a place that is safe for conversion, forgiveness, and mercy. We help them look to the future instead of being bogged down in the mistakes of the past. Second, we show them a place where they can contribute to parish life by sharing their ideas and talents to help build us up further.

The first part of hospitality is making the person welcome in our parish. This starts long before they enter through our doors. Hospitality, because it is an essential part of evangelization, starts with first contact. It initially happens in the chance encounters and interpersonal relationships we develop outside of Church.

This means moving beyond a cheesy 'all are welcome' sentiment. Many do not seek out the Church because they may not believe they will be welcomed. Most of these are people who have pasts. Maybe that past is pockmarked with failures, poor choices, crime, and sin. Maybe that past is defined by holding to a way of life that one has largely found unfulfilling. Maybe it is a past that wallowed in willful ignorance. Whatever it is, while not accepting sinful behavior, people must know that our doors are open to helping them change into what God calls them to be. Yes, Jesus met people where they were at. But He never intended to leave them there.

Second, when we get them through our doors, it must be our intent for more than sitting in a pew for one hour a week. That contact usually fades quickly. It is the reason about 50% of those who enter through the Church through the RCIA leave the faith. They are not incorporated into the life of the parish. This means more than getting them to help in various parish fundraisers. That is more the idea of hiring a maid than being brought into a family. No, incorporating them into all aspects of parish life is important. This means encouraging new ideas in how we do things and trying things outside our comfort zone.

We should be aware that sometimes coming into a parish is like starting a new school. As a child, my family moved around a lot. As I entered junior high, I noticed when I moved into a new area that all the popular cliques were already full and that if I wanted to be one of the group I had to act as they did. Some places I have lived in have been similar; no matter how long I am there, I am the perpetual outsider. This is not conducive to forming familial bonds. Yes, we have central beliefs that must be followed as they are a matter of divine revelation. However, how we do a fundraiser, a class, a parish event, and such are not usually matters of divine revelation...even though many times they are treated as such. No saying squashes hospitality more than this phrase: "this is how we always have done things."

It is Not All About the Benjamins

Hospitality is built on social aspects of our faith. We have things like the religious events (Mass) that are social aspects where we gather together as a family. We have things like fundraisers and service days where we gather as family to help the parish. Where most parishes lack is the third social aspect: getting together as parishioners because we are a parish. Too many times, when we gather outside of Mass, it is to raise money. This is a mistake.

I know many parishes have tried pure social events and they fall on their face. You have a core group that come, but most have other things going on and skip. It is like the parish photo directories, a small percentage show up. More often than not, people will come if they feel they have something personally to gain. This is not a Catholic sentiment. Our connections with the parish are not merely about what we get, but what we give. A family that rarely gets together to enjoy each other's company is a family that is in crisis.

There are opportunities for us to gather without raising money. St. Joseph has a fellowship gathering once a month. SS. Peter and Paul has the carry-in for the patronal feast day and will be starting a fellowship gathering (aka coffee and donuts) starting in August. I would ask both parishes to come up with ideas to come together, especially to meet new parishioners.

Both parishes are doing new photo directories this fall. I cannot tell you enough how helpful these directories are in helping new parishioners who want to get involved and for pastors (especially new pastors) to navigate themselves around the parish. I ask both parishes to go above and beyond in these directories.

The Gift of Time

Hospitality is always about the gift of time. That gift is given from the first moment of evangelization to the time of that person's departure. It is that gift we give to every person searching for help or a spiritual home. Sometimes that gift is used well and sometimes it is squandered. I ask both parishes to work on these things through their social concerns committees and through their parish councils.