

Pastor's Pen: Building a Fellowship

A few weeks back, I introduced a Hebrew word '*haverim*' to the parishes as a goal for us to shoot for as a parish. To refresh your memory, a haverim is a group of disciples who both model their lives after the master (for us, Christ) and who help each other in modeling our lives after the master by calling out the best in each other.

As your pastor, one of my primary goals as a pastor is to have a parish that is in all ways a haverim. My goal is to have every person registered in my parish be an active part of the haverim. It is a high goal to be sure. Why? About 50% of our registered parishioners irregularly, rarely, or never shows up for Mass. Yet, I want them to be strong parts of our haverim as well. Half of our parishioners give little to nothing to the upkeep of our parish. These numbers include people who have their children in our education programs. I don't wish to leave the lack of sacramental and personal participation in the life of the parish in such a state, but to find ways to shoot for 100% participation in building up the haverim known as SS. Peter and Paul parish and St. Joseph Parish.

How do we do this? That is the big question and the central goal of the stewardship program we are engaging in as a parish. Stewardship begs us to look beyond ourselves and our individual needs and look to the good of the entirety of the haverim. This is not a churchy vision of socialism or communism, it is a vision of disciples helping disciples to be disciples. This means we invest ourselves in what helps that end. This means prayer, hospitality, service, and education. I am more interested in providing a vision to invest in than asking for an investment and then providing a vision.

The Vision of a Haverim

The vision of a functional haverim is two-fold: model our lives after the person of Jesus Christ and help each other model our lives after Jesus Christ through providing the best of who are and looking for the best in each other. When we see weaknesses or failures, instead of using them as weapons to beat each other with, we apply truth and healing to lift each other up. For this to happen, we must lay aside the past and its animosities, hurts, and divisions.

The central vision of our haverim, if it is to work as it should, is the Eucharist. Where better for us to model ourselves after Christ than in His ultimate act of love for us that still extends to us a share in His life through our reception of the Body and Blood of Christ?! This act of the self-giving love of Jesus is what binds us together as a haverim. Through the grace given through the Eucharist, we are built up. In other words, our ability to be a haverim is first and foremost of work of God's grace and love, not ours. Our love, our stewardship, and our union are a response to what Christ already gives us. Our being a haverim is a direct response to God's love. *Hence, when 50% of those who belong to our haverim do not participate in the Eucharist, it gravely weakens us as a haverim on every level! It undercuts our efforts to educate the next generation. It diminishes our ability to serve.* It has got to be a primary goal to get that 50% who are not coming to find their way back.

Continuing the Haverim to the Next Generation

The groups of disciples who followed Jesus did not just look to forming a haverim among their own current number, but knew that Jesus's intent was that this haverim stretch until He comes again. This haverim of the early apostles and disciples became an ecclesia: a Church. Those who currently followed Christ knew they had a responsibility to draw others to join this group of disciples. This is done in two ways: Evangelization of those outside the Church and formation of those inside the Church, especially our youth.

A healthy haverim should have a primary goal of perpetuating itself. If I am modeling my life after Jesus Christ (who I believe is worth modeling my life after) should not I want others also to be given that same opportunity? Would I not want others to have the same joy I am cultivating in my life as an act of love for others? This love should drive us to seek out those who have no relationship with Christ (roughly half of American society) and reconnect those who were once part of the haverim back to the Church. A healthy parish has a healthy RCIA and adult education formation process to do just this. It is a profound investment of our time, energy, and resources to bring others into the local haverim known as our parish. It is taking the grace of the sacraments (especially the Eucharist) and using them to the ends for which they are given. We are not given the sacramental life of the Church to merely secure our own personal salvation; but so that we have the wherewithal to engage in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to make disciples of the nations.

We also must look to the offspring of our own haverim and be sure that we are giving them every tool they will need to be lifelong and successful members of this group of disciples of Jesus Christ. To this end we commit a tremendous amount of time, resources, and energy. It is that important. This formation starts and finds its greatest moments within the individual homes of those raising them (hopefully they themselves are part of the haverim). The greater haverim should be assisting them to do this duty with all diligence. Our part in providing excellent education (whether in the CCD, confirmation, or parochial schools) is paramount to our forming future members of the haverim that is our parish. It is dangerous and counterproductive to lowball this duty. The long term health of the haverim rests in our ability to connect these children to the sacramental life and mission of the haverim, as they will one day be those who lead. This formation doesn't end. It does not end when they leave CCD/ Parochial school. It does not end when they receive 1st Eucharist or Confirmation. It is not limited to classroom endeavors. It is something that continues through their lifetimes and is taught through service, prayer, stewardship, and engagement in the sacramental life of the Church.

In This Together

Being part of the haverim means we actively and generously look out for the good of each other. We look for the best in each other and bring out the best of ourselves to build up the haverim. Part of this begs us to let go of past hurts, no longer nurture division, and model ourselves not on comfortable variations of who we want Jesus to be, but model ourselves on God's divine self-revelation given to us through Christ and His Church... as uncomfortable as that may make us. For being part of any group is not to afford us creature comforts but to prepare us for what is coming. Bishop McKnight loves to say we are better together. We are. That is what a haverim is.