

Pastor's Pen: Being Members of A Diocese

In the last Pastor's Pen, I wrote about how we as a parish are a haverim, a group of disciples who model our lives after Christ and help each other in that modeling. I wrote how we as a parish have a duty as a haverim to provide for the needs of our parish and bring out the best in each other in forming ourselves, from youth to grave, in becoming better disciples of Jesus Christ. The discipleship should lead us to a better center of mercy, charity, and evangelization in our locale.

All this said, we have to realize something about our Catholic faith. The Church exists on four main levels: the family, the parish, the diocese, and the universal Church. Our haverim is part of larger haverims who all work to same exact end: becoming faithful and faith-filled members of the Body of Christ who carry on the call to be centers of mercy, charity, and evangelization. Each level depends on the other levels to fully fulfill its mission.

The most basic haverim is that of the family. It is in this context that the lessons of Christ are first given through the active participation, prayer, and example of the parents. Of the many lessons parents should impart is that fundamental call to service. Jesus said of himself, "The Son of Man came to serve and not be served." (Matt 20:28) This becomes the foundation of being part of each level of the haverim. Our homes should be schools of prayer and service.

I have already written about the parish as a haverim, I will now speak about the diocese as a haverim. Far too many times, we see the diocese as an external force whom we at best orbit. This is a dysfunctional way of looking at a diocese. The purpose of a diocese is to assist the local parish in its mission while the local parish assists the diocese in its mission: to be a center of mercy, charity, and evangelization on a larger scale. It is supposed to be a symbiotic relationship: we both help each other.

We do this in three very specific ways: prayer, support, and priestly vocations.

"When the Water Rises..."

The first thing each of us is called to do is pray for our bishop and diocese. There is an old saying 'When the water rises all the ships go up.' It is in our interest that both our bishop and diocese succeed at the task given them by God. When a diocese and bishop are on the right path and living up to the commission given them by Christ, it is to the good each parish, large or small. When a diocese becomes fragmented or a parish becomes an independent entity, it only damages the whole. Praying for God's grace and guidance is absolutely essential for a well running diocese.

The same can be said for our fiscal and volunteer support. If such things expand, the growth is seen as the parish addresses the needs of its congregation and community; and the same can be said for the diocese. In the Catholic Missourian, you might have seen stories about how the diocese is upping its ability to assist those in need through the St. Nicholas Home and a new Center for Mercy and Charity which will be tied to Catholic Charities of Central and North Missouri. Our bishop wants us to do more than merely pray for those in need, but to actually help. In our parish, we have established a Cares fund so we can do this on a local basis.

Our diocese has been on the cutting edge of helping parishes with schools with the Diocesan Excellence in Education Fund, in how it offers a tuition-less education in our primary schools so as to help parents, in how we run our tribunal (marriages, annulments, etc.), and the services and guidance it provides parishes. There is more to be done, however Bishop McKnight has been very proactive in fixing what needs to be fixed. I ask you to remember that when the Catholic Stewardship Appeal comes around next month. When we contribute, we help Bishop McKnight do the job he so actively does. Again, it is to our advantage as well that he succeeds.

Finally, it is in our interest to promote, nurture, and sustain priestly vocations for this diocese. This diocese has had a problem with this third issue for the entire 62 year history of the diocese. We currently have 92 priests, of whom 18 are retired, 3 are from religious order, 13 are foreign nationals on loan from dioceses in Africa and Asia, 2 are priests of other diocese (Wichita and St. Louis), 2 are military chaplains, and 22 of which were born and raised in dioceses and states outside of our own. This leaves 28 of our active priests whom were born and raised in this diocese. Providing vocations for our diocese from our own parishes has been a lifelong systemic problem. This shortage has caused the diocese to cut back on the number of Masses and look at closing and consolidating parishes. I will say this: I had a parishioner tell me how their sibling said he doesn't believe there is any vocation crisis because he can drive within a 20 mile radius and have a choice between a dozen mass times. The diocese has protected the parishes from just how critical things are.

It is to our advantage to support and nurture priestly vocations from our parish for the good of the entire diocese. While we are eternally grateful for these men who have come from other places to serve us, we must get to a place where we can serve our own. SS. Peter and Paul has not had a priestly vocation ordained in 3+ decades and I cannot find where St. Joseph ever has had one of its own. When we encourage strong young men to seminary (which is not guaranteed ordination) we invest in the long term interest of our diocese and parish. We are a sacramental Church. Without those sacraments and the grace given through them, our haverim is reduced to a fraternal order with lots of statuary.

Sacrifice Needed

Being part of a haverim brings it rewards but does require sacrifice. To do all the things we do takes sacrifice on so many levels. Let's be honest, to serve requires some degree (even a great degree) of sacrifice. This does mean I look to you to sacrifice while I withhold my own sacrifice. As a pastor, I do not ask you to do what I myself am not already doing. I don't ask you to tithe if I am not tithing. I don't ask you to pitch in if I don't. I make my sacrifices because it is part of what our haverim work well. I ask the same from each one of us. How well our haverim is able to thrive, whether it is the local parish, the family, or the diocese, is dependent on God's grace and our willingness to give of ourselves for the sake of helping each one of us grow in the faith and practice of the faith. That sacrifice cannot be made just by 20% of the parish level haverim, but by 100% of the haverim. We grow stronger the more we wish to put some skin into the game.

Hence I ask you to ask yourself how you might support the haverim, whether it be in your homes, parish, or diocese. We all benefit when we all get involved. We all benefit when we all are willing to do our part in sacrificing and serving.