

Pastor's Pen: In Search of an Identity

It seems every article I see about the Church anymore is bad news piled on bad news. Studies done on religious practice are grim. The scandals that have plagued the Church for the last several decades seem to morph and metastasize into deeper and more unsettling systemic problems. It can be overwhelming and depressing.

But is this the Church that Christ created? When one considers that one of the original twelve apostles stole from the community purse and later betrayed Jesus, then yes, there has always been an aspect of deep sinfulness within the Church. Why? Because the Church is made up of human beings. These human beings all have free will. That free will can be used in truly holy and astounding ways but can also be used in horrific and deeply sinful ways. This is why our use of free will is so very important.

What marks the highlights and the times of scandal is where the Church gets her identity. When the Church remembers she is the Body of Christ, she boldly stands and is marked with heroic virtue. When she forgets who she is and becomes worldly, she falls apart. The Church's identity is always solid when she keeps close to Christ.

In recent years, though, there has been a profound shift in how parishes and parishioners see themselves. Scripturally, Christ uses familial terms to describe the relationship He wants with us and that the Father wants with us. He sees us as a loving family invested in each other's good. Yet, most parishes and even dioceses are more a business than anything else. The Church has grown worldly. Our leaders are more likely to talk about political issues than moral issues. They are more likely to align themselves with politics while their flocks shrink and evaporate altogether. The more worldly we become, the more we are ripped with scandals, and the more we shrink.

From that worldliness comes a natural byproduct: division and tribalism. We get caught up in the desire of power so much that even ordained service is reduced to who gets to have power. Parishes can often be divided along ideological and dynastic lines. Where the power is the subject of debate, we err as did the apostles arguing among themselves who is the greatest. Christ corrects them and He corrects us. We are to be "in the world but not of the world." (See John 17) He has a very specific identity for us: that of a servant. On multiple occasions of correcting the apostles he tells them whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all; they must be willing to imitate Him. Our primary identity as Catholics is that of a servant who serves God and their neighbor.

We are called to servants. We are also called to be a family. Parishes are supposed to be families. I know this might sound strange and too much like a Hallmark movie. Yet, a family is exactly what we are called to be. Our family, though, is larger than just those who populate our local parish and come to our Church. It stretches to the diocese to which we belong, to the universal Church, to those who have passed from this life, to those in heaven. We are one.

Like a functional family, everyone pitches in as a part of the upkeep of the family. When a member declines to do their part while expecting the benefits of the family, it is to the harm of the family. Many parishes have many members who fit under this category. We do. It hurts us. It limits us. It divides us. When we prefer to be served and not to serve, we lose an essential element of our identity as followers of Christ.

It happens because individual members, both lay and cleric, can become more and more worldly. We can allow our desires to succeed in this world to supplant our duties as members of the family that is the Body of Christ. Worldly pursuits can crowd out divine service. The more the worldly pursuits take hold in our lives, the more loathsome service within the parish becomes. It is a reflection of when Christ warns us we cannot serve both God and mammon.

One of my tasks as a pastor is to call those placed in my care back to that fundamental identity of a servant and of a family member. I want to see this parish succeed in every way possible. I want it to thrive. I want what the bishop wants: parishes that are centers of mercy, compassion, and evangelization. For us to thrive means everyone helps somehow. It could be in little ways or big ways.

In this weekend's homily, I talked about the need for us to keep our focus on the eternal goal of heaven so as to not let it get obscured by a worldly vision of reality. We are meant for greater things. If we wish to belong to that part of the family that is in the Kingdom of Heaven, then we must be servant-members of that family here and now.

Despite the doom and gloom that so much scandal and religious apathy have engendered in the present, we can look with hope to the future. If we take on the identity that is Christ (which means we are servants as He is a servant), we have the ability to grow, thrive, and hope. The connection to the family needs to be here and now.