

Pastor's Pen: Stop Hitting Yourself!

When I was a kid, one of the many, many ways my brothers and sisters would torture each other was by grabbing each other by the wrist and using their own hand to hit them with, we would say, "Stop hitting yourself!" We thought it was riot. Mom and dad did not share in our assessment. In it, though, is a little life lesson. Sometimes, we hurt ourselves. Sometimes we inflict our own wounds. Many of those wounds come as a matter of stupidity (as my trips to the ER and resulting stitches will bear witness to) or recklessness (also involving stitches, and casts). Sometimes in fear or depression we can inflict further wounds. Sometimes the self-inflicted wounds come as a result of poor stewardship of our health. Many times, we can be our own worst enemies.

What is true for individuals is many times true for institutions. It makes sense as institutions are made up of human beings. Even when that institution has a divine helper, its human element can inflict grave harm on itself.

However, the opposite can also be said. Inasmuch as we inflict harm on ourselves, we can also do great good for ourselves. Being wise and prudent bears great benefit. Being good stewards of our health bears great fruit. Taking the time to learn, to grow stronger physically and otherwise, to use the benefit of discipline, and investing ourselves in life-giving relationships all can bear positive results.

Which course we follow, though, is up to us as individuals and collectively as institutions. Whether we thrive or decline is largely up to whether we are willing to do the things to thrive. It is also determined by how well we learn the lessons from our self-inflicted wounds.

Where we are

Our diocese is doing what many dioceses are doing in this country. We are gathering together to try and map out where we go as the number of priests decline. This has been a long time coming. The influx of borrowed international priests has afforded us the opportunity to kick this can down the road. Now, though, there is no more road.

I posit that the decline in the numbers of priests is a symptom of the disease and not the disease itself. This number corresponds with other numbers: Mass attendance, religious sisters and brothers, number of marriages, children in Catholic schools, and now the number of parishes as a whole. According to the figures released by CARA (Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate), between 2000 and 2016, the number of priests dropped by 8500. That means we lose 530 or so priests every year. About 7200 new priests replaced them. That deficit will increase as the Baby Boomer generation of priests, the largest group numerically, starts to retire. The influx of ordinations to replace those retiring will not keep up with the departures.

In the same time period, dioceses in the United States have closed a net total of 2003 parishes. There are now 17,233 parishes in the USA. Although the Catholic population has risen by 3.2 million in the same time period, only 22% on average go to Mass regularly. In that same time period, a net of 1527 Catholic parochial schools were closed. This trend will continue. In fact, just about all numbers, save Permanent Deacons and Lay leadership, are trending down, in some cases steeply down. Bishops and dioceses are left to wrestle with how to shepherd in such circumstances.

So are we on a sinking ship? I don't think so. There is no self-inflicted wound that cannot be undone. We have to learn to quit hitting ourselves. We have to learn from our mistakes and change course.