

PASTOR'S PEN: PLAYING SPIRITUAL JENGA

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When those counting on a structure to provide for their needs undercut the integrity of the structure, how can the structure continue to stand?

I have been reflecting on this for the last 24 hours as I prayed on the Feast of St. John Lateran. St. John Lateran is not a person; it is the Cathedral Church of the city of Rome. It is the cathedral of the pope and hence the cathedral of the world. Built in the 3rd/4th century, it has been the Cathedral of Rome since the pontificate of St Sylvester I in 324.

The archbasilica, like many churches, is made of stone. The same image is used by St. Paul to describe the Church: as a building formed on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. I started to wonder to myself just how many stones can be removed from St. John Lateran before the structural integrity is compromised. Surely the cornerstone remains, but how long can the remainder stay intact if stone after stone are removed?

I think about this on a parish level. The parishes assigned can be likened to the brick building they both are. When all the brick and stone are stable and present, the building itself is as well. But if stone and bricks start getting removed, the structural integrity starts to wane. Those who count on the stability of the structure have the greatest vested interest in the integrity of the structure.

What do we count on our parishes to do? We count on them to help in the Christian formation of our children. We count on them to be the place where we can grow closer to God through the sacramental life of the Church. We count on support, solace in our grief, and a place of fellowship. In parishes with schools, the parents count on the parish (most schools are ministries of the parish to which they belong and not separate entities) to educate their children and help in their Catholic formation.

What happens when those who have the most vested interest in the integrity of parish undermine its stability? It endangers not just what they count on but what their fellow parishioners count on as well.

How do those with vested interest in the stability of a parish undermine it, you may ask?

By not being faithful stewards of that which they count on. Stewardship falls into three parts, each integral to the mission of the parish. When any of the three are actively or passively undermined, the whole parish suffers.

Part 1 of stewardship is actively participating in the Mission of Christ through Mass and prayer. Nothing, and I mean nothing, will more undermine the stability of a parish like people absenting themselves from Mass and the Sacramental life of the Church. It is a vitriolic cancer that spreads from generation to generation. It is cutting off the flow of grace needed. It is undermining what a school does when the Catholic student gets a false message and teaching from the very person sworn to be the primary teacher: the parent. Since parochial schools are not meant to be private schools (this is reflected in the way our diocese does not charge tuition to registered parishioners), when they are reduced to being of such in the mind of the Catholic parent, it dangerously undermines the structural integrity of the church. It acts as if the family were pulling their bricks from the building. Do it enough times and the structure is perilously endangered. The absolute worst thing a Catholic parent with their children in school can do to both the formation of their child and the integrity of the school is to skip Mass and wallow in a state of disbelief about the truth of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It undermines the structure not just for the moment, but for generations to come.

The second part of stewardship is the time and energy we give to the mission of Jesus Christ. Mass is the start of the equation; we are given grace because we have a mission to engage. A good parish operates like a functional family. If in a family, every person takes on responsibility as is age appropriate, then the family is strong and cohesive. When some absent themselves from the good of the family and treat others as “the help,” it dissolves the bonds of family and threatens the intact structure of the family. In most parishes 15-20% of the people do 90% of the work necessary to keep the place functioning. I often wonder what could be accomplished if that number was just doubled, let alone was at 100%. We would need to build parishes instead of closing or merging them. Imagine the boon of vocations to priesthood and religious life that would flourish in such circumstances! But families withdraw their help even though they depend on the intact structures of the parish because they have deemed so many more things -- especially sports -- as a more important focus of their time and energy. When that happens, stones are removed from churches and used to build stadiums. I wonder how God will judge that.

The third part of stewardship is the sharing of our treasure; tithing. This is more than paying the bills. Many parishes struggle to do that. No, tithing is about the help we give in the larger community to engage in the Corporal Works of Mercy as well as providing the best we can in all we do for our own parishioners. Yet, the reality is most parishes, especially those with schools, struggle financially. Some parishioners hold the tithe like a hostage to manipulate the parish. “That'll show them!” they think. And then, when the structure collapses...what then?

My plea is to engage and keep the structural integrity of our parish, especially if you expect much from the parish. Help us build up, don't undermine the structural integrity. I know no parish, school, or pastor is perfect. I am not. There are always going to be challenges. No challenge can ever be overcome by withdrawing from it. Together, let's bolster that structure built on the cornerstone that is Jesus Christ.