



NINE PASTORAL CHALLENGES FOR CATHOLIC PARISHES

Even though Jesus expressed his desire to found a church during his public ministry, the church was not inaugurated until the Day of Pentecost when Christ descended upon the disciples and gathered in the Upper Room. Concerning the Church, the *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults* states: *The Father called the church into existence. The Son established the church. The Holy Spirit filled the church with power and wisdom at Pentecost. The Holy Trinity abides with the church always, creatively and providentially. The church empowered by the Holy Spirit, brings Christ's salvation to the world. She is the instrument of God's call to holiness. At the same time, the church is made up of sinful people, yet despite the personal sinfulness of her members, the church remains holy by the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit who permeates her.*

Because the church was planned by God, established by Jesus and is led by the Holy Spirit, it always has a divine dimension to it. Because the church has sinful members she will sometimes fail to do a good job at showing forth the face of Christ. Because the church was founded by Christ she will *never* be in need of replacement—a mistake Martin Luther and other have made. But because the church is made up of sinful members she will *always* be in need of renewal and purification. Because Jesus promised to be with the church until the end of time, she will never self-destruct no matter how many bad Popes, bishops, priests or laity she may have at a particular period in history. Because the Holy Spirit is guiding the church she will always have the ability to renew herself after particularly bad period in her history. Church history tells this story over and over.

Nine Pastoral Challenges

Even though we are the church founded by Christ and even though we hold that the 'fullness of truth' that Jesus came to bring 'subsists' (a Vat 2 term) in the Catholic church, that is no reason for complacency. In truth we have much to learn from some other Christian churches that today are drawn large numbers of seekers, including large numbers of Catholic seekers. As I look at parish life today and as I look at the 'successes' of some Evangelical churches, I believe that the following are nine pastoral challenges that we face. (Success cannot always be judged by numbers. On Good Friday Jesus did not have many followers.)

- Catholic parishes need to do a much better job at **hospitality** and **fellowship**. Recently, I sent Rebecca

Breaux (Ashley's wife) to visit a local Protestant church. She was amazed at the hospitality that she experienced. It is always wonderful to feel welcomed. Who does not want to return to a place where one feels very welcome.

- Create a sense of **belonging**. Hundreds of Catholics can be registered members of a parish for 30 years and no one knows who they are. I know this because I all too often preside at the funerals of such people. One important key to a sense of belonging is participation in some ministry or sharing group. This is an ongoing challenge. I see parishioners participate in a *Christ Renews His Parish* weekend and for the six month formation period and then disappear. What is wrong with this?
- We need to do a much better job at helping Catholic children, teens and adults come to a **personal relationship with Jesus**. Christianity is primarily not a message. Rather it is about a person—Jesus Christ. If we are well informed Catholics but do not have personal relationship with Christ we are missing out on the Core of our Christian faith. It bothers me a lot when I hear Catholics say: "I went to twelve years of Catholic school. Or I was a Catholic for twenty years, but I did not have a personal relationship with Christ." Needless to say, the total blame cannot be placed on the school or church. Lots of other kids in some schools may have come to a personal relationship with Christ and many adults in the same parish may also have come to a relationship with Christ. But in my opinion, all too often our schools and parishes could do a much better job in this area.

This past weekend 101 seventh graders received the Sacrament of Confirmation. I wonder how many of them have a personal relationship with Christ. I wonder how many of them are in church this weekend. Do we need to do a better job in this area? Absolutely and I hope we will. When we have our next confirmation in two years' time it will be a whole new program. Maybe only half of those students who enroll in the program will actually be discerned as ready, it will be much better to have a small number who are excited about their Catholic faith than to have a large number who are just going through a sacramental hoop—with little or no sense of what they are committing themselves to.

- Do parishes need to do a much better job at helping children, teens and adults to love the scriptures. Sadly, for all too many Catholics the scriptures are dead and

boring rather than being a dynamic, alive word that feeds their souls and guides their lives.

- Do a much better job at helping our children and adults understand why we believe what we believe. Sometimes this task is called *Apologetics*, (to defend). Many of the programs on EWTN have awakened us to the need for this catechetical need.
- Do a better job at helping Catholics feel more comfortable and more willing to share their Catholic faith. Our CRHP retreats and now our Living in Christ Retreat and RCIA process helps big time in this area.
- Do a better job at providing spirit filled liturgies. Such liturgies would be characterized by good hospitality, good music, homilies that speak to people's lives and reverent worship of God.
- Do a better job at searching out for the unchurched.
- Do a better job at fostering vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Can you name some more pastoral challenges?

Names, Titles and Symbols of the Holy Spirit

In the scriptures we find several names images and symbols referring to the Holy Spirit and his activity in the world. The following are some of them.

Wind. The Spirit is frequently symbolized as wind in the scriptures: the wind blowing through the valley of dry bones, reconnecting them and breathing new life into them (Ezekiel 37:4-10), the wind blowing through the house where the disciples were gathered at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). In John 3:8, Jesus says: *The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.* In these words, Jesus is saying to us, the Spirit is present among us in an invisible but very active way. We cannot control the Spirit's presence, but we can experience the Spirit's presence and activity in our lives and in our world.

Fire. Fire has the potential to destroy, purify and transform. So does the presence of the Spirit within us. He can help us to overcome the destructiveness of sin, purify us of ungodly behaviors, and transform us into the likeness of Christ. Fire also gives light. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to enlighten us about the true ways of God. He is our divine inner light. On Pentecost Sunday, the 'tongues of fire' which descended on the Apostles gave them the power to speak in many languages.

Water. Water like wind and fire has no definite shape, but it is the nourishing matrix of all life. Life on earth began in the seas and human life begins in the water of the womb. In Ezekiel 36:25-26, God promises that the people will be renewed in the Spirit as by a refreshing shower: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you . . ." In John 4:14, Jesus promises the Samaritan woman the gift of the Spirit through the metaphor of "living water". In John 3:5, Jesus

says to Nicodemus "*Amen, Amen I say to you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit*" (Jn 3:5). The church has taken these words to refer to the sacrament of baptism which destroys sin in us and floods us with the new life of God. The waters of baptism initiate us into the Church the Body of Christ and bestows on us the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Dove. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. In the story of the Great Flood (Gen 7-8), a dove was released by Noah returned to the Ark with an olive tree branch to show that the flood waters were receding. The dove image at Jesus' baptism may have symbolized the end of the reign of sin and its destruction. The dove also symbolizes peace. In Jesus, harmony between heaven and earth would be restored and the waters of death would recede before him.

Advocate/Paraclete (John 15:5-15). This is a term used to **connote** a defender in court, a vindicator (Job 19:25). Jesus told his disciples not to worry what they would say in court, for he would grant them an Advocate who would inspire them as to what to say. The Advocate is also called the Spirit of Truth (Jn 16:14-26), the one who would lead the church into the fullness of the truth that Jesus came to bring. This Advocate is our comforter and guide as we journey through life.

Laying on of Hands. In the Acts of the Apostles the gesture of laying on of hands is usually associated with one or more persons praying for one or more persons for the imparting of the Spirit (Acts 8:17, 19:6). The laying on of hands gesture is also associated with ordination (1 Tim 4:14). Finally, the gesture was used when praying for healing of the sick (Acts 9:12).

Meditation

The Spirit comes gently and makes himself known by his fragrance. He is not felt as a burden, for he is light. . . Rays of light and knowledge stream before him as he approaches. The Spirit comes with a tenderness of a true friend and protector to save, to heal, to teach, to counsel, to strengthen, to console. The Spirit comes to enlighten our mind. . . and through us, the minds of others. . .

'As light strikes the eyes of one who comes out of darkness into the sunshine and enables him to see clearly things he could not discern before, so light of the Spirit floods our souls and enables us to see clearly things . . . beyond the range of human vision, things hitherto undreamed of. St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Have a blessed week,

