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Meeting the Pastoral Needs of Parishioners within the Context of a Vibrant Parish
(Part 4)

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In the last issue of the North Country Catholic, we discussed three elements that can impact parish vibrancy: (1) Evangelization: Children/Youth, Young Adults, Seniors, (2) Engaging Children and Youth in Meaningful Ways, and (3) Music. In this issue, let's look at (1) technology and (2) hospitality and socials.

1. **Technology**

When we talk about the need to be open and hospitable, "the first portal of today's parish is its website." (Simon, 106) It should contain all the information about a parish a parishioner needs to know. In addition to the Mass schedule, the weekly bulletin should be available online.

I know that some pastors have considered the feasibility of installing large screens that can be seen by everyone to use for projecting hymns and readings. Even though there are hymnals available in most churches, if you look around during Mass, you'll see many parishioners not using them and not engaged with the hymns or responses. Screens are an investment that churches might consider. Some would say there is a direct positive correlation between the use of screens and the number of people who are fully engaged during Mass. "Fr. Steven told us they began projecting prayers and hymn lyrics up on large screens at one of the churches in this community three years ago. It quite literally has changed our celebration of the Sunday Eucharist." (Simon, p. 109) "When one parish renovated, they installed large screens. Now, they broadcast the words across the screens and the parishioners sing out. Some parishes have done away with the songbook entirely in favor of screens." (Simon, p. 109) As mentioned earlier, Molly and I attended Mass at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Fernandina Beach, Florida recently. They installed two large screens and projected the hymns and responses on the screen throughout Mass. It was remarkable the difference the screens made in terms of the participation of those in attendance.

2. **Hospitality and Socials**

Our last topic in developing vibrant parishes involves hospitality and socials. Churches must provide welcoming environments for parishioners and guests attending a church service. It is important for people to feel comfortable in their place of worship. I would like to share another experience we had attending St. Michael's in Fernandina Beach, Florida. The greeters there, as in our parishes, offered an initial welcome, but it didn't stop there. Before Mass began, the pastor asked for the visitors to raise their hands and for the parishioners located next to the visitors to introduce themselves and to offer a warm welcome to their church. The pastor went on about how much he appreciated our attendance and that we were always welcome at St. Michael's. Unfortunately, many of our churches don't get many visitors/guests, so this might not be practical in all cases. Nevertheless, there needs to be a genuine spirit of welcoming to everyone who comes into the church. Since I am sharing experiences we had in other churches, let me add one more vignette. This was a Catholic church in Virginia that we attended for Christmas Mass while visiting our son and his family. The church was filled. One of the lay ministers in the choir took the microphone and, in a

very unpleasant tone, told everyone to find a seat and keep quiet, as the choir was about to sing. It was obvious that the person speaking was directing her comments to those who probably attend only at Christmas and Easter. Nevertheless, the tone, besides being inappropriate, was a perfect example of how to be unwelcoming. It sometimes comes down to the little things we say and how we say them that can make a difference--one way or the other.

When Bishop LaValley hosted a number of Listening Sessions as part of his Envisioning Process a few years ago, he sought advice from parishioners as to areas that the diocese should focus on. Parishioners were encouraged to attend the listening sessions and provide the Bishop with their thoughts on the strengths of the church and areas that need addressing. As was mentioned in the first article in this series, the three diocesan priorities evolved out of this process. The point that I want to make here is there were many comments that related to the need for our churches to become more welcoming. Hospitality is important, and it makes people feel good about being a member of the community. This feeling or spirit should not be underestimated.

Vibrant parishes not only provide welcoming environments, they also consider the scheduling of social activities as an important part of building vibrant parishes. It is also seen as an important way to get Catholics who have fallen away or people considering Catholicism to get engaged in an informal way with the church. All of our parishes include active parishioners and disengaged parishioners. Unfortunately, the disengaged can actually be a larger number than the active parishioners. We need some way to draw disengaged and fallen-away Catholics back into the church community. Social activities sponsored by a parish, with no expectation that anyone attending needs to be an active participant of the church, can help the disengaged and fallen-away Catholics to begin during the social activities to make connections with our more engaged parishioners. "Several pastors talked about developing social occasions that had no overt "join our church" hook. Such secular activities forge initial contact with new people. Friendship and familiarity can pave the way for a future invitation to worship. One of the challenges is to offer high-quality events that intersect with the personal interests of a large enough number of unchurched people to justify the effort and the related costs." (Simon, p. 147)

That's where the social dimension comes in. Vibrant parishes need to consider Social Committees that have responsibility for offering throughout the year various social activities open to all people in their area: potluck dinners, movie nights (targeted at youth and adults), discussions, game nights (targeted at youth and adults), sports contests, etc. These kinds of activities can be an important way of getting the disengaged parishioners interested in becoming more actively involved and re-engaged in the church community.

We have some parishes in the diocese that already do this. Perhaps, we need to look more closely at this and discuss how to infuse social activities into the overall pastoral planning of the parish community. "When parishioners start filing out of the church, vibrant parishes provide more for them than just a friendly goodbye wave. Some pastors encourage parishioners to stay behind by hosting a breakfast where people can get to know each other. Others prefer the classic coffee and donuts to accompany the long conversations that can take place outside the church after Mass. It takes planning and work to create reasons for people to stick around and connect after Mass..." (Simon, p. 103) Food for thought.

Concluding Statement:

The Living Stones Planning Committee hopes you have found something useful in this series of articles and that it might be a continuing stimulus for discussion, planning, and positive change. We cannot continue to do business as usual. We have the talent, creativity, and opportunity to begin a process of dynamic and significant change that can, in time, lead to the development of vibrant parishes--parishes in an even stronger position to meet the pastoral needs of all parishioners.

We may also be daunted by the task that lies ahead. Look at the struggles the church's faithful have had to endure over the centuries in trying to evangelize and spread the faith. We are fortunate to have a Catholic Church that is steeped in tradition and culture. The church has had to grow and change over the centuries as society has developed and changed. This couldn't have been more evident than in the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965 that profoundly changed the structures and practices of the church.

This series of articles has presented many facts and figures. However, as we know, Jesus saw first and foremost with His heart and that is how we must respond to this crisis--with our hearts, and then with our time and talents for the survival the Church, which we all love. From the earliest beginning, its history is filled with stories of sacrifice. We are now called to sacrifice. Our church is faced with a critical problem, one perhaps made more so, because it is insidious, as the effects come upon us slowly. Shaking our heads and yearning for the good old days will not bring solution. Working together, side by side, parish by parish, will.

Don't forget that in our parish communities, personal and spiritual growth is a shared responsibility. As already mentioned, the parishes need to develop activities to be offered and parishioners need to come and participate in those activities to demonstrate their commitment to the community and their commitment to personal and spiritual growth on all levels.

Young families face the demands of balancing work and family and wonder how they could add one more thing to the "to-do list." Perhaps older parishioners think, "It does not matter, I will not be around." However, there comes a time when the church calls us--all of us--and we must respond--for our children, our grandchildren, and those children whose names we do not even know. Ensuring the survival of a vibrant church in the end may not "be for us, but let it be because of us." Let us pray for the courage, strength, and perseverance to accomplish the task.

Let's sail and not "fall adrift or lie at anchor." Let's finish with Oliver Wendell Holmes's quote cited earlier in these articles: (Holmes's, p. 52)

I find the great thing in this world
is not so much where we stand,
as in what direction we are moving:
To reach the port of heaven,
we must sail sometimes with the wind
and sometimes against it,
--but we must sail,
and not drift, nor lie at anchor.

Thank You and God Bless.

References Cited:

Holmes, Oliver Wendell (1858). The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table. Boston: James R. Osgood & Company.

Simon, William E. (2016). Great Catholic Parishes. Indiana: Ave Maria Press.