“Nurturing Parish Life”

“My dear Dad used to say: “In the Catholic Church, the parish is where the rubber hits the road!” It’s true isn’t it? When a new pastor is installed, which will be happening in many of our parishes this summer, the wording of the Rite of Installation highlights that it is in the parish where the Sacraments are received, where families bring their new born children to the font for baptism and their loved ones who have died to entrust them to the Lord in the Funeral Mass. In the parish, the members share in the Holy Eucharist at each Mass, they have their sins forgiven in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, they share in Holy Communion for the first time, they receive the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, they are wedded as husbands and wives in Holy Matrimony, they are cared for in illness, receiving the anointing of the sick. In the parish, members enter into a communion of prayer and a communion of persons. Around the pastor, such a communion has to begin with the leadership team in the parish.

The parish is where the Gospel is preached, where the faith is taught and shared, where the corporal and spiritual works of mercy come alive, and where most people find the grounding for the exercise of and perseverance in their Catholic faith.

Just as some people would say “all politics is local,” so we might say “all Church is local” to the extent that what most folks know and experience of the Catholic Church revolves around their experience of their parish. For this reason, it is so important that all of us, priests, deacons, consecrated religious and lay men and women, do all we can to nurture parish life. In fact, promoting healthy parishes is one of the major goals of the first pillar of our new Diocesan Strategic Plan, for the good of all our parishioners and parishes.

A few weeks ago, from May 13-15, I had the privilege of accompanying folks from 28 of our parishes to the “Amazing Parish Conference” in Cincinnati. It was a blessed opportunity to spend time with parish staffs from across our diocese, being equipped with the tools to nurture and to build a stronger culture of prayer, teamwork and active discipleship for our parishes. Together with over 1,000 attendees, we were inspired by Patrick Lencioni, Chris Stefanick and Sister Maris Stella, SV, and by the music of Sara Kroger. We heard from Father John Riccardo, John Martin and others. We offered Mass with Archbishop Dennis Schnurr and
prayed a Eucharistic Holy Hour with parish teams from across the country.

The health of a parish depends on the health of its leadership. At the Conference, we were challenged to embrace the four qualities of a parish leadership team member: one who is a committed parishioner, has a missionary heart, is a team player, and is whole parish oriented. We were challenged, with vulnerability, to recognize the five behaviors of a team pyramid: trust, conflict, commitment, accountability and results!

Before the Conference itself began, we gathered as members of our diocese at Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Retreat Center, where we were led in prayerful reflection by Father Norman Fischer of Lexington, KY, shared meals and offered Mass together. It was both inspiring and encouraging to be with so many of our pastors, parish priests, deacons, consecrated religious, and numerous lay men and women who so faithfully serve as parish staff and volunteers, who day in and day out “make the rubber hit the road” in our parishes. I am both hopeful and convinced that the participation of now more than 50 of our parishes in the “Amazing Parish Conference” cannot help but bear spiritual and pastoral fruit.

Now, is every parish required to make the Amazing Parish Conference? No. Is every Parish able to make the Amazing Parish Conference? No. But would every parish benefit from the principles and tools being shared? Absolutely. In fact, the Amazing Parish is not about a “one size fits all” approach, nor is it a “program” to be implemented. Instead, it is all about taking best organizational practices and applying them in a Catholic way to the most important organization we have in the local Church: the parish.

We are grateful for how the members of each of the parishes of our diocese strive to live and share the Catholic faith. We want all our parishes, in common parlance, “not just to survive, but to thrive.” And we want to do all we can to help make that happen.

Back when my Dad spoke about how the parish is where the “rubber hits the road” for the Catholic Church, he was seeing the shift from parishes with a team of one – the pastor – to parishes which were being served more and more by faithfully committed lay men and women who were becoming intentional disciples for the sake of the Gospel. Today, it is not only important but essential that parishes have staff and volunteers who, together with the pastor, faithfully serve the mission of Christ and His Church in the local parish.

Of course, it’s not only those who have attended the Amazing Parish Conference who are called to the intentional discipleship which nurtures healthy parishes, it’s all of us together, priests, pastoral leaders, parish staffs, volunteers and parish members combined. It is only first by each of us being serious and joyful as intentional disciples of the Lord and as members of His Church, that then together, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we can announce the Gospel, celebrate the Sacraments, invite people into and back home to the Catholic Church, and be instruments who lead others to holiness, to communion, and to a life of worship and service. Why? Because “In the Catholic Church, the parish is where the rubber hits the road!”

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