

# After Easter....Community Life

Frank DeSiano, CSP

David Putnam and Richard Campbell, in their highly influential book *American Grace* had one important observation which applies, I think, in a particular way to the Catholic Church. They expressed their observation in words like this: if people come for the doctrine, they stay for the community.

This pertains in a special way to Catholics because few churches emphasize doctrine—in the sense of the content of our teaching—as much as we do. And, on the other side, most churches do far better at emphasizing “community” than we Catholics do.

Of course, Catholics find community in a variety of ways. “Fellowship” doesn’t always mean hanging out with others over coffee, or coming to a particularly friendly bible study. From the Knights of Columbus, to the Sodality, to rolling up sleeves for the homeless, to the ushers hanging out after Mass, Catholics find many small niches in which to connect with others.

But when it comes to explicit dynamics of community, most parishes really have to work at it—and many do not. Our parishes tend to be larger than most local churches; half of our Catholic parishes can actually be defined as “megachurches” if one accepts the definition of a megachurch as having more than 2,000 members. (2,000 members is a small parish in Rockville Center, Long Island, NY!) Because of their size, and their varied composition, people do not naturally get to know each other. “My parish feels anonymous,” people will often say about their local parish. “It’s so large.”

So we have the ongoing drama of what happens to the catechumens and candidates after Holy Saturday, after they are “initiated” sacramentally but perhaps not very “initiated” socially into the parish community? For decades, observers have been talking about the number of catechumens who seem to disappear after Easter. “Six months later, you don’t see them.” A variety of explanations of this pour out, but the data is hard to secure. The USCCB did a study after the millennium which vaguely concluded that, because many in the RCIA are preparing for marriage, it’s probably logical for the newly-baptized to move to another parish. Others have more sobering, and more disturbing, conclusion: “You evangelized them to the RCIA, but not to the Catholic Church.”

The catechumenal process, which our documents call the “norm” model of catechizing people, has a lot to bring to the Catholic parish. But perhaps its most important lesson is that parishes have to have communal processes in place to further the evangelizing experience of neophytes. Some of the dynamics present in the ministry of RCIA—scripture, sharing, praying, growing in faith—need explicit vehicles in our parishes, or else the RCIA process

might itself be giving people dogma, but not continuing the community that the sustaining of modern faith requires.

Many pastors, when one mentions small groups, just roll their eyes. They are expressing two things: 1) let's not come up with automatic, knee-jerk answers to every problem in the Church; and, perhaps more pertinently, 2) just who is going to do small groups?

Nevertheless, the RCIA demands an addressing of the "community" issue in our parishes; these might be some of the ways the issue can be addressed. 1) While not everyone loves small groups, they are worth the investment. Once one begins to generate this kind of activity, a lot of energy moves from the onus of the pastor onto the community of those who are involved in small groups. Group leaders, and participants, want the experience to continue. 2) Community doesn't have to mean small groups; it can mean a variety of ministries. How do we invite catechumens to involve themselves in social outreaches for the needy, in various liturgical needs, in visiting the sick or homebound, in the plethora of committees that many parishes have? This takes explicit facilitation; one cannot presume the neophyte will take the initiative in a relatively new community to present themselves to people who may still seem like strangers. Part of the "mystagogia" process has to be linking neophytes up with various parish leaders and giving hearty invitations for involvement.

There is a helpful discussion about parishes: Are they communities, or are they communities of communities? For most of our US parishes, the latter has to be the image. This means that pastoral leaders need to foster, among the various communities that make up the parish, ongoing dynamics of welcome, invitation, and involvement. These dynamics have to spill down from parish leadership through the pastoral council to all the active members of a parish. The RCIA, in effect, is telling parishes that this is not some optional thing parish can get around to someday; rather, the catechumenal process, is telling us that instilling multiple patterns of communal involvement is essential to the survival of parish today.

If we are so good at giving folks the doctrine, perhaps we can get better at giving them community as well.

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