

Pastor's Pen: Leaving Lukewarmness Behind - Part 2

In the history of the Church, outside persecutions have never been able to destroy the Church. They have caused grave damage, but cannot destroy. The Church has suffered greatly at her own hand, though, throughout the ages. One of the greatest autoimmune viruses to inflict the Church is the one that was inflicting the Church of Laodicea: that of lukewarmness. An autoimmune disease is any disease in the body is essentially attacking itself. Some autoimmune diseases, such as MS or rheumatoid arthritis can literally cripple the body to immobility. So lukewarmness does the same. It cripples a parish or diocese into immobility and a disagreeable acceptance of a status quo.

Lukewarmness and the Status Quo

I believe that the phrase, "We have always done it this way" is a sign of a dying institution. This doesn't mean we throw out or adapt teachings on faith and morals within the Church. This doesn't mean we treat Mass as a blank pallet on which to do what we want. Truth be told, I believe we need to stick stronger to these things. Compromise, in these areas, is a direct result of lukewarmness.

The status quo I speak of is the willful pursuing of ways of education, formation, and evangelization (or the lack thereof) that are pursued (usually half-heartedly) even though they produce little to no positive results. More often than not, the status quo takes a one-size-fits-all mentality. The status quo also desires a modus operandi whereas you come to us and our programs as opposed to we go to you. Lukewarmness and the status quo seek to stay safe. Lukewarmness and the status quo resist taking chances or stepping out of comfort zones. Why? Lukewarmness and the status quo are ruled by fear of change.

I remember being part of committee whose objective was to look at a policy that everyone around the table knew was not working. For THREE years we spoke about it. We brought in experts. However, any divergence from the current policy was met with a mix of wringing of hands and steadfast stubbornness of changing the current policy...even though we had already acknowledged the current policy didn't work. After the three years, the policy stood unchanged without the slightest adjustment and still did not work.

The Qualities of a Lukewarm Parish

Why was Jesus so revolted by the Church of Laodicea? Why did he find it so bad that He wanted to projectile vomit it from His mouth? He accuses them of being lukewarm. What made them lukewarm? They were comfortable with how things were. Is being comfortable a bad thing? After all, many in advertisement act as if it is the ultimate goal. In a way, being comfortable can be

detrimental to a parish. To maintain comfort in a parish, change cannot happen. A lukewarm parish does have certain qualities.

First, a lukewarm parish is all about the status quo. It will be all about the status quo even when it is generally acknowledged that the status quo is harming the parish. Leadership will be a good-old-boy network of champions for the status quo. They will shut out new voices while complaining that new voices do not come forward. They will keep using the same tired things over and over again. They will be champions of deferred maintenance in every aspect of parish life. They will complain about the catechesis but not change materials. They will complain about the lack of youth while either insisting on continued pandering or doing nothing and blaming the youth for not liking what they like. In all this, the actual teachings of the Church will be circumvented when they become inconvenient.

Second, a lukewarm parish is slow to evangelize. They will want new members, but insist that new potential members come to them and adapt 100% to the local status quo. Church teaching that does not back the status quo will be forgotten or deliberately left out so that things remain as is. A lukewarm parish will not retain many who join them. They will also lose the overwhelming amount of their youth. The reason for this is that a lukewarm nature is a dying nature. It is not a human trait to invest in what is dying. Investment of one's time, energy, and resources usually will go to what has a future. The more vibrant the future, the more vibrant the investment of time, energy, and resources will be as well.

Third, a lukewarm parish will shoot for the minimum. As with any lukewarm entity, just enough will be done to keep things breathing. A minimalism in worship, in catechesis, in formation, and all other aspects will be hallmark. The most dominant thing will be fundraising. A plethora of fundraising (capital projects aside) will show that the parish isn't showing enough life for many to invest. Staff will be minimal. Programs will be tired. In such a parish, the budget will determine the mission. When that happens, lukewarmness has become toxic.

Finally, a lukewarm parish will be a place of hand wringing and excuses. People will know something is wrong. They will feel helpless to change these things. Helplessness will breed excuse making.

None of these sounds like what Jesus wants for His Church. If we consider what He went through in bringing us into existence through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, we should want for us what He wants for us.

In the passage from Revelations, His answer to Laodicea's lukewarmness is *"But from me gold refined in fire...buy white garments in which to be clothed...buy ointment to smear on your eyes."* Revelations 3:18. In the next three weeks, we will look at these three things and how to use them to leave Laodicea once and for all!