

Pastor's Pen: Beginning a New Year

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SS. Peter & Paul, Boonville

Last fall, SS Peter and Paul Parish was one of a half dozen parishes in the diocese that began assessments of how they effectively carry out the mission of the Church. We inventoried every aspect of ministry and outreach we have as part of this assessment. Everything from education to liturgy to social outreach to youth formation and beyond was listed. We went through each category to find who we were targeting: what age groups, what level of participation, what level of faith. This parish, like most every parish, suffers a fatal flaw: we have built a parish for the found. Almost all of what we do is aimed at maintaining those who come. We must do that, mind you. The goal of a parish isn't to get you in and then promptly ignore you. Then again, the purpose of a parish isn't to tend to its current members only.

There are 725 registered families in SS. Peter and Paul. If national averages hold, there are probably 100-125 former Catholic families living in the area. While we can talk about the registered households who might be homebound or in the nursing homes, of the 725 households registered in the parish, less than half come to Mass on any kind of a regular basis. Our October count for last year had about 625 parishioners per weekend. Granted, that is up about 40 or 50 from two years ago. Even with the gains, less than half of those on our books attend Mass. If they are not attending Mass, you can be sure that any other type of support is not forthcoming either.

Like most parishes, if everyone who called themselves Catholic now or at some time in their lives came to Mass, the three current Masses would be full and I would have to add more. To say we have our hands full with just bringing our fallen away and falling away back home would be an understatement.

The mission of a parish, though, isn't just limited to Catholics and fallen away Catholics. If national percentages hold true, about 50% of the population of Cooper County doesn't go to Church at all. To be sure fallen-away Catholics or non-practicing Catholics would be in that lot, the majority would be non-practicing Protestants and the fastest rising religious group, the "nones".

By Canon Law, I as a pastor am responsible for the spiritual welfare of not just those parishioners that fall in my parish boundaries, I am responsible for the spiritual welfare of every single soul that lives within the parish boundaries. That means every soul in Boonville, Prairie Home, Jamestown, Blackwater, New Franklin, Fayette, Boonesboro. That means every soul in Boonville Correctional, every soul in every nursing facility, and every rehab. I am responsible for them whether they are rich or poor, regardless of their skin color, political affiliation, and so on. If I am responsible for them, that means the parish has a share in reaching out, taking care, and calling to faith each and every one of them.

Gratefully, we do outreach at the prison, in the nursing homes, and through the SS Peter and Paul Cares Fund we help those in need in our community. I am grateful for those who help with these, but it is a drop in the bucket for what our task fully is.

This will require a reclaiming of the ancient mantle of the mission of the Church. The Church from her very beginnings was evangelical. Catholicism in the west has lost that. It lost that evangelical fervor when it lost its identity. Without an authentic identity, there is no reason to engage in any mission other than maintaining those who already come.

On Thursday evening, the committee for this self-study met. In prior meetings, we filled out a sheet that delineated everything we do and target groups for those things. It exposed where our strengths and weaknesses were. The task this time around was to identify three areas where we need to concentrate. Those areas are:

- 1) Evangelization 18-65 years old
- 2) Pastoral Care 12-50
- 3) Leadership 12-66+

These might narrow a bit or shift. The goal is to develop a plan and immediately get about the business of doing these things. What this will look like will unfold as time goes on in the next few months. The parish will need help in fleshing these things out. It will have to be a priority. It is worth noticing that each age group includes those who are regularly practicing, irregularly practicing, or not practicing. It is time to rethink our vision of what being a parish is from being a place focusing on those who come to reaching out to those who don't.