

Pastor's Pen: Love and the Parish

In the homily two weekends ago, I asked you to take the following passage from I Corinthians 13: 4-7 and asked you to put your name in place of the word 'love' or 'it.' Hence, it should read like this:

"Your name is patient. _____ is kind. _____ is not jealous, _____ does not put airs, _____ is not snobbish. _____ is never rude, _____ is not self-seeking, _____ is not prone to anger, neither does _____ brood over injuries. _____ does not rejoice in what is wrong, but _____ rejoices with the truth. There is no limit to _____'s forbearance, to _____'s trust, _____'s hope, _____'s power to endure."

In presenting this spiritual reflection and exercise to you, I was hoping to set up a type of examination of conscience and a criterion for action. I stated in the homily that were we to grasp this simple concept, we would see a major transformation in the world around us. Last week, I wrote on how this applies to the family in order to unite them. This week I would like to apply the same to a parish.

What is a parish? It is a group of families in a region coming together as the Body of Christ. It is a family. Too often, parishes have become retail entities that offer goods and services as does a store. It can be cynically said we offer education, programs, and holy stuff. Lacking a check-out register, the collection becomes one. I can't imagine anyone would believe that this is what Jesus had in mind in giving us a Church. The dynamic He gives us is the dynamic of family: He calls us, the Church, His bride. He calls us God the Father's sons and daughters. The same thing that builds up a family is the very same thing that builds up a parish: Love.

Underscoring all this is one simple truth: God is love. To live a life of love is to live as a child of God. As love is a theological virtue, this means that it needs the grace of God to grow and is a habit formed positive choice by positive choice.

I am Patient, I am Kind...

In our parish, we are imperfect people who worship and work with imperfect people. As parishioners, we never stop growing in our knowledge of each other. Some of what we find we love, some of what we find annoys us. While we challenge each other to positive growth, we must exercise patience as a matter of allowing knowledge to expand. We come from different backgrounds, educations, temperaments, and affiliations. Some have been here for generations and some have recently moved in. Getting to know each other can be awkward. Yet, because we all are baptized in to the same faith and belong to the same Church, we must exercise the kindness and patience necessary to build bonds.

I am not Jealous

Within a parish, we learn to rejoice in the success and gifts of others. Too often, though, success and gifts can be met with envy and jealousy. Jealousy and envy are signs of self-centeredness. If I cannot be happy for something a fellow parishioner has or has received, then it expresses a discontent with myself. Cultivating a sense of thanksgiving for all that one is and all that one has will do much to stymie jealousy and envy within our homes. The thankful person is not threatened by the blessings another person is afforded. Ministries, committees, and such exist to build up the entire body, not to be bases for power-wielding.

I am not snobbish, rude, put on airs, or self-seeking.

The family is the first place where we learn that the goal in life is to be the best version of me that I can be with God's grace. Too often, though, it can be perverted into an "I have to be better than you" motif where everything is a contest for domination. Snobbishness and rudeness are defense mechanisms we put up to make ourselves feel superior to others. For a Christian, being superior/inferior is not why we live. Love forces us to get the focus off of ourselves and onto the good of others. Love leads us to be humble and honest about ourselves and those around us. Love and humility go hand in hand. Within the family, we need to teach this humility so that we are grounded in truth and not worried about how we are thought of; we learn to let our gift and not our pretension speak for who we are.

I am not prone to anger, do not brood over injury, do not rejoice in wrong, but rejoice in the truth

Love changes our focus in life. It looks for the good. It doesn't overlook the bad, but seeks to define people by their goodness. Our families live in a society where we are forcibly taught to look for, exploit, and define a person by their worst actions and traits. We are taught to allow the acne to define the face. Our Catholic parishes should teach by example the importance of such focus and the ability to forgive injury. We teach mercy and forgiveness within our parishes as an act of love. We learn to forgive the past mistakes and sins with hope of reconciliation and conversion.

As too many parishes remain fractured because we brood over injury, so too can parishioners hold grudges (justified or not) against past pastors, nuns, teachers, and parishioners. Grievous things have been done. No one needs to approve of or enable wrongdoing, but the parish is where we learn to forgive. As the old saying reminds us, "To hold a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die."

There is no limit to my forbearance, trust, hope, and ability to endure.

Within the parish, we must recognize that these abilities to love will be tested daily. Even those who love us most will hurt us. The necessity to be patient, forgiving, merciful, humble, deferential, and magnanimous will occur every day. Since love is a virtue, it is built up or torn down choice by choice. This love, though, will build up and strengthen parishes. ***We must remember that all of us are imperfect people being helped by a perfect God to live with Him for eternity. Let us learn to live in peace with each other here and now.***