

## **Pastor's Pen: A Necessary Fundamental Shift**

Not long ago, I wrote an online column on how the idea that there are free things is a really a myth. We keep using that word, but I don't think it means what we think it means. Certainly politicians like promising free stuff to garner votes, but what is meant is that they will coerce someone else to pay for it. Aside of the grace of God, nothing is life is free. Someone has to do the work, give their time and resources, and expend their energy for things to be 'free' to others. For example, parents don't charge their children fees for food, housing, clothing, entertainment, and such. It is free to their children, but the monies needed to pay for those things and the expending of time and energy to earn the money to buy those things falls squarely on the backs of mom and dad. Perhaps, as the child grows older, they start to share in the responsibility of getting and maintaining what is needed for the good of the household. Certainly in ages past and in poorer areas of the world, children work at home, on the farm, and in menial labor to help support the household. A child who never does chores, never adds to the family pot occasionally, or never learns responsibility becomes the entitled adult who cannot function in the world.

What is true in the family is true also in the parish. The parish is fundamentally a family. Christ talks about founding a church (an ecclesia in Greek). This is a novel idea in Scripture. This Church is modeled after the Chosen People (Israel) of the Old Testament, but spreads much wider to include people of every race and tongue, or every people and nation. The Church was never meant to be seen as a business or fraternal order from its beginnings. That Jesus refers to the First Person in a familial term (father), refers to himself in a familial terms (son, groom), refers to the Church in a familial term (bride), and refers to all us within that Church in familial terms (brothers and sisters, sons and daughters), tells us the core of how He identifies His Church. If this is how Jesus identifies us, is this not the way we should identify ourselves?

Bishop McKnight has said that we need to stop calling our schools 'free' to parishioners. He reminds us that schools and all other parish endeavors require sacrifice. Just as in a functional family, the more each member contributes adds to the well-being and success of the entire family. He is not reversing the decades long policy of no tuition for parish families, rather he is reminding each family that the school and parish as a whole has to be a 'all-hands-on-deck' mission. I will be honest, it bothers me a great deal when families participate in a program in our parish yet do not go to Mass nor contribute to the well-being (fiscal and otherwise) of the parish. This fundamentally undercuts the programs and reneges on the

promises made at baptism. It is terribly unjust to those who do come to Mass and make the necessary sacrifices to make this parish go. This hurts the ability of the parish to serve all of her parishioners.

So why not charge tuition or high fees to those who do not come to Mass or fiscally support the parish but call themselves our fellow parishioners? It would be so easy. I have fiercely played with doing this and have come close. Who don't I? Because I would be imposing a penalty on a person who is a parishioner and on their children, Canon Law has a very strict guideline on the imposition of penalties. Secondly, it would have the effect in all likelihood of pushing people further away and not drawing them closer to the faith. Finally, because it crosses a dangerous line that denigrates the parish from a family to a business. It does mean that we must take the harder route of bringing people into the faith without diluting who we are as a family of faith. That does leave us vulnerable to those who wish to game the system in order to get a desired result. That will come at a steep eternal cost though. God does not like when it when a person defrauds His family: to defraud His family is to defraud Him as head of household. Recall how Jesus asked St. Paul on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" as Paul/Saul was persecuting the early followers of Jesus.

I know that sounds harsh, but when we make demands but give nothing, when we tear at each other, when we have power struggles, when we are slothful and negligent in regards to our parish or diocese, it is not merely human beings we attack, we attack the head of household, Jesus Christ.

The art of stewardship is more than monetary donations and tithing; it is seeing to the upkeep and good of our entire household we call a parish. It is assisting in the parish's outreach to the larger community. It is the willingness to make our family, the parish, known, as Bishop McKnight is asking, to be centers of God's mercy and forgiveness. To achieve this requires a fundamental shift in or thinking of what we are as a parish.

The parish is not a business or financial institution.

The parish is not a fraternal order who does nice things in the community.

The parish **IS** *a family* who looks to the good of each other so well that others want to be a part of that family. My family home was that house in the neighborhood where the kids of the neighborhood hung out...not because there was no structure, but because there was. We were poor, but always had room for another at the table. We are not poor, but we need to be as a parish where people want to be because they will find here what cannot be found elsewhere.