

From the P.A.'s Desk

**Reaching Out:** Last Tuesday I met Fr. Christian Tabares from Our Lady of Consolata Parish, and we talked for over three hours about his comprehensive outreach and evangelization plan for his parish. He and his parish have created a model for a comprehensive evangelization process, and it is one of the best I've ever heard of. The most common parish evangelization question today is: "how do we do it?" His plan answered that question for me. I'm so excited after hearing how his parish is reinventing Christian Evangelization, and over the next few months, I'll be laying out his 5/10/15 year plan, which will outlive most of us. I've begun to invite people from our community to be part of a brainstorming and evangelization team, so stay tuned.

**Parish Registrations:** Last weekend I talked to someone about registering in the parish, and I began to reflect on why we Catholics stress the strong need to be registered. One reason is that Catholicism is a group religion, and even though we can be faith-filled and spiritual without others, the whole Catholic faith is based on the relationship model. The entire Bible (both Old and New Testament) focuses on "community salvation" over "individual salvation," so the idea of being Catholic means to be connected to God through others, primarily the church. Even the two great themes of Vatican Two were "the body of Christ" and "the People of God." Both those themes are radically communal. In other words, we long to belong, and in belonging with others, we encounter the very nature and presence of God among us.

I began to reflect on other reasons why we need to be connected to a parish community, and I came up with five main reasons:

**1. *Because It Is Not Good To Be Alone.***

We are essentially social by nature. To be a human being is to be with others. We wake up to consciousness not as an isolated ego, but as one among many. Our quest for God must be consistent with our nature as social creatures. Hence, it must have, as a non-negotiable part, a community dimension. Ecclesiology by definition is just that, walking to God within a community. We are best ourselves and have our best possibilities in community. The moment we emerge into the world, we begin the long process of trying to merge. This is especially true when adulthood is reached. We begin to go deeper and deeper into community, to lose our separateness, to not stand apart but to stand together as a part of something greater and bigger than any one of us. Community then is primarily the context for "being saved" and "becoming human."

**2. *Because God Calls Us There***

The Judeo-Christian notion of God and humanity is clear. Faith and spirituality is not a private search for what is highest in oneself but a communal search for God. Although I have sympathy for people who turn away from institutional religion for their spiritual needs, often their move fails to stand the test of time, for religion and spirituality are two sides of the same coin, and they badly need each other. Spirituality without deep roots in a religious tradition may not weather the storms of life. Trying to go it alone spiritually, without a faith community, seems foolhardy, even contradictory. Life-giving spirituality is relational. There can be no real Christian spirituality divorced from ecclesiology. To deal with Christ is to deal with the church. On the other hand, religion that does not nurture people's spirituality is as dead as a doornail.

### **3. To Dispel My Fantasies About Myself**

Faith and religion are about challenge. Religion is not about a private fantasy that we can share with a few like-minded individuals. The church is fallible, imperfect and sinful, but just like our individual families, it is also real. Anthropologists tell us that one of the primary functions of any family is to carry the pathologies of its members. Simply put, I go to church so that other people might help me carry what is unhealthy inside of me and so that I might help them carry what is unhealthy inside of them. In the presence of people who share life with us regularly, we cannot lie, especially to ourselves. In community the truth emerges and fantasies are dispelled. Nobody deflates us more than our own family. The same holds true for our church family.

### **4. Because Ten Thousand Saints Have Told Me So.**

I go to church because the vast majority of good and faith-filled persons that I know go there and their blessings are felt there. As far as the good and faith-filled people who do not go to an ecclesial church, they still are surrounded by families and commitments that provide the community dynamics of a healthy life.

### **5. To Dream With Others**

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." I must admit that in a world of six billion people, I cannot change all that much. But I do believe that together we can. Every person is a "work in progress" and remains so this side of eternity. Our personhood is never something accomplished without personal growth and failure, learning, discovering, and creativity. Every day is a fresh gift that brings new promises and possibilities. And the emphasis must be on becoming; human nature is never "given" as a finished product, but comes as a lifelong journey that unfolds with the help of God's grace, partnership with others, and our own best efforts. Another name for this "life" of God in humankind is the soul. It is the animating principle of humankind, and the soul defines our personhood precisely because it is our sharing in the life of God.

To belong to a parish community doesn't mean we all have to think, act, and behave alike, nor does it necessarily mean we like everyone equally. Even Jesus did not like everyone, although he did love them the way God loves everyone. Loving like Jesus means you must value others the way Jesus values you. It does mean though that we put kindness and hospitality at the top of our agendas. The great spiritual master, Henri Nouwen once said: "Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment."

Why belong to a parish community? Because God calls us there, and before Jesus began teaching anything, he called people together. May we pray for God's grace to be all that God wants us to be and become.