

# Parish Life Perspectives

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I have fond memories of my hometown parish. I was baptized in All Souls Church, Overland, Mo. There, I made my first confession and first communion. In the parish school, I was taught and formed. I was confirmed in All Souls, played on the parish teams, joined others to help those in need and offered my first solemn Mass there as a newly ordained priest. My mother still makes her home in All Souls Parish. It is a memorable place - and people.

After ordination as a priest, I served in seven different parishes. The accent is on "different." Each parish had a vitality. Each had its limitations. Each offered many kinds of blessings.

As bishop, I have been privileged to visit all the parishes and missions in our diocese - large and small parishes, old and new parishes.

In all of my personal experiences of parish, I have met God. In many ways, people in the parishes have affirmed and built up my faith. I hope I have done the same for some of them. A Catholic parish has always been a significant part of my relationship to God, to others, to life.

For some time, I have wanted to write to you about parishes and parish life. A few years ago I wrote a pastoral letter to you bout our Catholic faith; it was titled : "Sharing God's Life Together: Being Catholic in the bible Belt." That letter concerned the challenges which we encounter in the bible Belt, as we maintain and deepen our Catholic identity in southern Missouri.

Uniquely, our parishes help us live that identity in our homes, places of work and our local communities. Parishes are a visible source of God's blessings to us. Let me indicate here that everything I say about parishes is equally said of our missions, which, in effect, are parishes without a resident priest.

As I travel from one end of the diocese to the other, I am constantly impressed by the faith of Catholic people. Frequently, I see firsthand that their parishes play an important role in their faith. I write this letter to provide food for thought as you cooperate with God's grace to grow in commitment to God and to God's ways through your parish.

## Parishes Reflect the Risen Christ

In reflecting on parishes, the starting point is Jesus and our relationship to him. It is that relationship which gives meaning to the parish and parish life. We begin our relationship with Jesus in baptism. (Do you know the date of your baptism?)

In his letters, St. Paul refers to those who have been baptized as "the

body of Christ" (Rm. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:27) St. John's Gospel uses the connection between a vine and its branches to describe the unity which the followers of Jesus have with him (cf. Jn. 15:1-10). Throughout history the church has searched for images to express the intimate bond which exists between Jesus and those who have been baptized.

The Second Vatican Council calls those joined to Christ "the people of God"—a community of individuals closely related to one another because of their common life in Christ. Whatever images are used, the belief is that the very life of Jesus unites his followers with him and with one another. The closeness of that union led St. Paul to say, "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20)

When we say with the author of Colossians and Ephesians that Christ is the head and we are the members of his body (cf. Col. 1:18 Eph. 1:23), we profess that we are "one people" and "one body of Christ."

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## Parishes Continue Christ's Presence in the World

As the body of Christ, we are a presence of Jesus, the Christ, in every part of this diocese. Pause to think about that. The parish is Jesus in a particular place and at a particular time. If Jesus is to be present in our towns and cities, it must be in our flesh. We, as parish, are called upon to be the Christ, whom the Father has sent into the world – especially that part of the world which is southern Missouri.

It is not possible to overemphasize the importance of the sacrament of baptism through which we are grafted into Christ. Without baptism, parishes are only a gathering of people who might get together because they happen to like one another or because they are interested in a common project.

The unity we have in our parishes, however, flows from a real inner sharing of the life of Christ. It does not come simply from common interests or common projects.

The parish is quite different from a group organized around a particular cause. It is not merely a neighborhood organization, as worthwhile as such organizations can be. The parish is a gathering of the baptized.

Parishes Continue the Mission of Jesus  
God is a God of love and mercy.

Love and mercy sent Jesus into the world. As members of Christ's body, we receive God's love and mercy in many ways, including through those special gifts called sacraments. But we are not only receivers of God's love and mercy. Constantly we are called to bring God's love and mercy to others by our good works. Jesus did much good for others, and he says to us, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (Jn. 20:21).

The mission of the parish is to fulfill in its town or city the mission of Jesus. Without being simplistic, as parishes we ask, "What would Jesus say and do in this city? In this town of ours?"

Most likely, he would attempt to bring harmony where there is contention and turmoil. He would bring healing where there is brokenness, sorrow and pain. He would bring wisdom, knowledge and understanding about God and God's creation where there is ignorance. He would seek out those whom others might avoid. The work Jesus would do in our time and in our place is the work our parishes are called to do.

Jesus did not leave us alone to continue his work. In fulfillment of his promise, he sends us the Holy Spirit "to complete his work on earth and to give us the fullness of grace" (Eucharistic Prayer IV). The Holy Spirit, dwelling within each of us, is the source of our common unity. The Spirit strengthens and enlivens the church and our parishes, so that the work of Christ will be done in our world.

## Parishes Are Communities

The word community has different meanings, but it always refers to people being together—for one reason or another. Communities differ depending upon the kind of bonds which unite the people who form them. The bond of blood unites a family. The bond of proximity unites people living in the same neighborhood or town. A parish's bond of unity is not the blood of family relationship or neighborhood proximity or a common cause which unites a group.

The bond of parish communities is the very life of Christ coursing through the inner spirit of all who form the parish as God's people. As I wrote in my previous pastoral letter to you, "We are a community of life, receiving life and giving life."

The Holy Spirit guides and strengthens us to be a community of life. We find ways of having the Spirit's grace become productive. Leaders of parishes, for example, should offer opportunities for people to know one another. By coming to know one another, parishioners are more likely to work together, help one another, assist those in need, and grow spiritually.

Naturally, challenges confront people wanting to live and work

together as a community. These challenges vary from parish to parish. In some the challenge may be large numbers; for others it may be great distances. Such challenges can be successfully addressed.

Challenges to unity are greater than geography or numbers, however. Within the church and within every parish a wide variety of opinion exists about what the church should be, how it should act and the way it should pray.

St. Paul says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). The Holy Spirit is given to each of us. It is our challenge to see that varying opinions about the church, its life, work and prayer are often (though not always) the voice of the Spirit creating a more abundant life within the parish and the church.

In the face of varying opinions within a parish, see with the eyes of faith that all members of God's people can, opportunely or not, be filled with the Holy Spirit. Believing that is easier than living it. Parishioners know that insights and preferences within the community of believers can differ greatly. The eyes of faith must focus on the Lord's inner presence so that unity and harmony can be sought.

Listen. The second thing a community of faith must do is listen. If, in fact, the Holy Spirit does speak within the church through its members, we must listen and sincerely try to hear what others are saying.

Third, talk respectfully with one another, recognizing the dignity which each member of the body of Christ possesses.

Finally, be in harmony with the whole church in what we believe and do in our parishes. The Spirit acts not just in one person, one parish or one diocese, but within the whole church. Catholics belong to a community of faith which is worldwide.

#### Parishes Are Eucharistic Communities

The parish community is a eucharistic community. As such, the parish community does more than simply gather for Mass. In eucharist, it celebrates who it is and accepts what it is called to do.

Catholics believe that "at the Last Supper, our savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the centuries until he comes again" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 471). The sacrifice of the cross and its sacramental renewal in the Mass are one and the same. They differ only in the manner of offering.

When we meditate during Holy Week on our salvation from sin and death through the saving work of Jesus, we hear the refrain that Jesus "was obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). That obedience was an offering which Jesus made of himself to the Father. "Not my will, but yours be done" (Mk. 14:36), Jesus said.

Because of our baptismal unity with Christ, the offering which he makes

of himself is also an offering we make of ourselves to the Father. We are offered with Jesus to the Father. Just as Jesus' obedience to God's will on Calvary gave glory to the Father, so our own obedience

sion in the world were constantly nourished by union with his Father. His was aided by frequent prayer. Parishes are called to help their parishioners experience God in prayer.

to God's will in our daily lives gives the Father glory. As the priest proclaims, "Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours almighty Father, forever and ever" (Eucharistic Prayers: Final Doxology), Christ offers himself and the entire community to the Father.

The unity we have with one another in Christ is realized, as fully as it can ever be on this earth, in the eucharist. Together we participate in Jesus' offering of himself to the Father. Together, we share in a communion with Jesus and, because we are one in him, in a communion with one another. We, the parishioners, are not at a eucharistic celebration; we are the eucharistic celebration. This is what "eucharistic" community means: one people offered by Christ and, with Christ, offering itself to the Father.

The eucharist is essential to who we are. We cannot be Catholics and parishes without the eucharist. That fact creates a concern for me as your bishop. It is important that Catholics not be without the opportunity to participate regularly in the celebration of the eucharist.

I recognize possible difficulties in the future if the number of priests in the diocese declines. In cooperation with our human personalities. The rosary may be priests, I will do everything possible to one person's comfort, for example, while have the celebration of the eucharist it may be another's distraction. The quiet available to Catholics of the diocese. of an hour before the blessed sacrament Please pray for, and help identify, vocations to the ordained priestly ministry.

The insights of Vatican Council II regarding the eucharist are important for our parishes. Many people, with the priest as presider, now have key roles in the Mass. Men and women who take those roles - as lectors, greeters, gift-bearers, members of choirs, extraordinary ministers of the eucharist, servers, ushers - personify that we are a community of one another.

Since Vatican Council II we have built and renovated our churches to show our unity around the altar-table. A rail no longer separates the presiding priest and people. We are, indeed, united as God's people.

If the insights of Vatican Council II are part of the way we come together to celebrate the eucharist, they will very likely be part of the rest of parish life. Conversely, if the council's insights on worship are not evident in eucharist, they will probably be quite limited in other facets of parish life. I ask our parish priests and parish councils, as inspired leaders, to continue bringing the numerous blessings of Vatican Council II to all segments of parish life.

#### Parishes Are Called to Lives of Prayer

To be the presence of Jesus, the Christ, in today's world, both as parishes and as individuals, we need to imitate his life of prayer. Jesus' inner life and his mis-

Jesus was often surrounded by people asking for something - healing, comfort or simply his attention. It is striking that, to meet the demands put upon him, he would go into the desert to pray. Jesus needed a guidance which comes only through prayer. He needed to learn his Father's will and to be strengthened by the Spirit.

Every parish, without exception, is called to be a parish of prayer. Individuals are called to grow in their lives of prayer. But the parish also, as a community, is called to that same growth. The community gathers for prayer not only in eucharist but in many other ways too. The parish brings people together, to hear and to pray with the Scriptures. It may bring them together for charismatic prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours, the rosary, the stations of the cross, an hour before the blessed sacrament, communal penance or anointing of the sick. There are many ways of praying. We are called to be a people of prayer.

Private prayer is also a part of each believer's love of God - at home, traveling, anywhere. Each parish should teach, not merely encourage, its members to pray.

Ways of praying are as diverse as the insights of Vatican Council II reflective reading of the Scriptures lifts people. Some people find that

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can be a joy for one person and uninspirational for another. Some people find that

A parish listens to its individual members of choirs, extraordinary ministers of the eucharist, servers, ushers what it can to nourish the life of prayer of its parishioners. That means, in practice, that a parish should help its people - individually and as a community - to

experience a richly varied life of prayer.

Occasionally, ways in which some people pray can become a source of division within a parish. The joy and peace which a particular kind of prayer brings to a person or to a group of parishioners may not be experienced by those who pray differently. We should always respect the ways in which others pray.

#### Parishes Have Mission of Evangelizing

Jesus was the good news sent by God to the world. Because parishes are the presence of Christ in their own towns and cities, they should be good news both to parishioners and to the general community in which they live.

For a variety of reasons, some people may not think of the Catholic Church or parishes as being good news. They may think of the church or parish as a rather impersonal institution. Evangelization includes helping others overcome negative

views which they may have of the Catholic Church.

Simply put, evangelization means identifying the good news within our Catholic faith and making it known to others. Briefly, the good news is that God loves us even to the point of dying for us, that sins and disappointments in life can be overcome, that through the teachings of Jesus and the sacraments of the church we can have direction in our lives. It is good news that life on this earth can lead to eternal life after death, that we have not only the Lord but also one another to help us throughout life and that we need each other because that is God's plan. The good news also attests that suffering can have meaning - as there was meaning in the suffering of Jesus.

The church helps us know good news not only from the Gospels, but from many truths which flow directly and in directly from the teachings of Jesus. We continue learning and maturing. Hearing the good news of God's love for us and letting it inspire our hearts and deeds is a life-long work of God. This, too, is part of the good news: God is our companion in all the experiences and phases and times of our lives.

Catholics need to hear the good news and grow in its promise. We need to bring that good news to as many others as possible in our neighborhoods and regions where we live and work. Parishioners are to be like Jesus, who brought good news to the people in the synagogue, the marketplace and homes, along highways and byways, near the lakeshore, on the mountain and at places to eat.

To be evangelizers, parishes are called to be compassionate and caring. The Romans used to say of the early Christians, "See how they love one another" (Tertullian: *Apologia*). Love for others, both within and outside the church, is evangelization in a clearly visible way.

Actively, we approach others to invite them to Mass and to the parish. We welcome those who approach us. Welcoming means much more than simply shaking hands with someone on Sunday morning. It means showing care and concern for both the spiritual and material well being of our brothers and sisters - both those who are Catholic and those who are not.

It is a great source of joy for me that many parishes in this diocese are known as places where the needy can receive care. That care is evangelization, a witness to the good news of the compassion and mercy of God. I encourage every parish to continue developing ways in which it can be of assistance to people in need. My prayer and hope is that people who are in contact with the parishes of our diocese will, in multiple ways, encounter the caring gentleness of God.

#### Parishes Continue Jesus' Mission of Teaching

One of the great missions of each parish is education and formation. Formation goes beyond giving information to an

individual. It helps a person develop and

After birth, we have a long way to go in learning who we are. We do not know if we are Catholic or Protestant, American or Asian, rich or poor. We do not know our gifts or our limitations. We learn all these things about ourselves as we grow and mature. Others help by teaching us.

Who has the right and duty to educate us as children? Answers to this question often presume a formal educational setting, such as the school. But long before going to school, a child has already learned a great deal about who he or she is. The child is surrounded by parents, brothers, sisters, friends, television, playmates and relatives who constantly teach, for good or for bad, "This is who you are." The child also develops an increasingly clear idea of who others are. In the first five or six years of life, a child has developed basic attitudes about self, about others and about life itself.

Obviously, the learning process continues for us beyond childhood to all the rest of our lives. What people communicated to us about ourselves, others and the world in those early years is constantly being reinforced or challenged by other people and new situations. Every day of our lives, throughout our years, each of us is surrounded by teachers. We are taught by our families, our friends and our enemies. We are taught by television, movies, newspapers and books. We are taught in school, at work, during sporting activities and while recreating.

Who we are, what we believe and how we mature in our faith requires support and approval from others. Such support and approval is the principal way in which our learning and values are reinforced. If people or events approve us, we are likely to become stronger in our ways.

If, on the other hand, we are criticized or severely questioned about our beliefs and behaviors, and if support or approval is not available to us, we are likely to become unsure of what we believe and practice. We may even stop believing and practicing our faith. Life surrounds us with an ebb and flow of challenges to, and reinforcement of, our beliefs and behaviors.

A significant part of the teaching mission of Jesus was to bring people to each parish have a parish council. The greater maturity. That is a major part of council works in accord with its mission the mission of each community of "to participate in the planning process and believers, called the parish. It is important in the establishment of policy for the to realize that all parishioners are, at the parish" (Guidelines, article ii, section iv).

Those who serve as parish council The teaching mission of the parish members offer a great service to the pastor is not restricted to giving information and all parishioners. They do not step out about the Catholic faith. It includes a continuous effort of teaching each person, Christ when they plan and help formulate adults as well as children, what it means policy for the parish. Parish council to be Catholic. Such teaching can be as in members must always be in touch with formal as friends and neighbors supporting one another in their faith, or it can who they are in Christ. Their work be as formal as a classroom setting.

Whatever the mode, the parish helps us to be both good learners and good teachers.

Catholics have always believed that parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children. The rite

of baptism affirms that belief. Catholic schools and parish schools of religion for children in public schools help parents fulfill their obligation, but these never substitute for parents' responsibility to teach and to form their children. The parish should help parents be good and effective teachers of their children, approving and reinforcing the beliefs and behaviors they want them to have.

The parish helps adults understand that they are constantly picking up attitudes and behaviors from the media, neighbors and one another. The parish increasingly is providing informative programs for adults. Such programs help parishioners develop a healthy critical sense to judge what they see and hear in the world around them.

Attitudes and behaviors of American society can be examined in light of the Gospel and the teachings of the church. For instance, a parish informational session or series of sessions might identify values being communicated by television programs. It can evaluate their impact in light of what the church teaches about consumerism, sexual morality, violence, lack of concern for others, ignorance of God's commandments and other such matters. Children, youth and adults can all be assisted by educational programs provided by the parish.

#### Parish Structure

To carry out its mission well, the parish needs structure and organization. Every living organism has structure. Whether the parish be described as the body of Christ, the people of God, as vine and branches or as a community of faith, order is necessary.

The pastor, appointed to his office by the bishop, is the primary leader of the parish. He presides over the eucharistic community. He symbolizes the unity between the parish as a worshiping community and as a community with a mission. In his vocation, the pastor is called to work collaboratively with the parish staff and his parishioners. He truly fulfills his role of leadership by providing opportunities for the people of his parish to develop the skills they need to minister to others.

In March 1988, I sent "Guidelines for Parish Councils" to each parish in the diocese. My introductory letter urged that

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With the pastor the parish council examines the challenges facing the parish,

studies them and develops practical responses to them. Planning requires listening carefully to the members of the parish. Sometimes it requires study and research.

It always requires a consideration of the financial and personnel resources required to bring a plan to fruition. Planning always demands development of supportive ways to assist those responsible for carrying out plans in the parish. The basic question always before the pastor and parish council is, "How do we carry out the mission of Jesus in our parish?"

The word *ministry* is more easily used than defined. Generally, ministry is a work done to build up the kingdom of God on earth. There are different kinds of ministry. First, baptism itself calls each Christian to be a minister to others. Second, the church calls some people to perform specific works for the church - for example, lectors and those designated by the parish to visit shut-ins. Finally, there is ordained ministry - the diaconate, priesthood, and episcopacy.

Some parish ministries, such as teaching, are focused on the internal life and welfare of the parish community. Other ministries, such as serving the poor of the area, focus the parish on its external missionary effort.

The ministries created in each parish are suggested by the needs of the parish and its area. For example, a parish of predominantly retired parishioners might develop ministries of adult education, service to the homebound and assistance programs for the poor. But it would also provide a ministry program for youth in the parish, even though the number of youth may be small. The mission of Jesus, fulfilled through the work of the parish, calls forth many ministries according to the needs identified by the pastor, the parish council and the parish as a whole.

Many lay people minister within their parishes by assisting in various roles at eucharist, sacramental preparation programs, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, organizing prayer groups. The list can be quite lengthy. All of these roles are important for the life and growth of the parish.

Both internal and external ministries, done in the name of Jesus, provide practical ways for parishioners to deepen their own personal faith by serving others. Oftentimes, parish organizations minister both to their own members as well as to others in their towns and cities. In doing so, parish organizations are clearly serving a ministerial role and add to the vitality of the whole parish.

#### The Broader Parish

Sharing the life of Christ creates unity within the parish. Baptism also unites parishes across southern Missouri. Parishes assist, and are assisted by, other parishes.

The areas surrounding Joplin, Springfield and Cape Girardeau, the forested central counties and the farmlands of southeast Missouri, are each a significant part of the diocese of

Springfield-Cape Girardeau. Each has unique characteristics.

These five major areas are divided into 10 smaller districts or regions, which reflect the distinctiveness of each one. In recent years, priests, religious and many of the laity have been working together to develop ways of helping parishes work together in regions. Each parish in the diocese has representatives on a regional planning team.

Through their work, parishes will be able to act together for the good of individual parishes as well as carry out the mission of the Lord in a particular region, which is larger than any individual parish. It is my hope that interparish cooperation within the various regions will add to the growth and witness of the church in southern Missouri.

Some of the Lord's work can be accomplished only by each parish working together with every other parish as a diocese. As your bishop, I am deeply grateful for the many ways Catholic people participate in the life of our diocesan church. The staff of The Catholic Center, I assure you, will do everything humanly possible to respond to the needs of the parishes of the diocese.

**"If the council's insights on worship are not evident in eucharist, they will probably be quite limited in other facets of parish life."**

The bond which unites the parishes of our diocese also unites every diocese on earth to each other. We will never know more than a small number of the hundreds of millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet, our not knowing them directly makes them no less our brothers and sisters. We look to them, and they look to us, for the working of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Catholics of southern Missouri have always been unusually generous in their support of the universal church in their prayers and contributions for the missionary work of the church and our Holy Father. In a real sense, the parish to which we belong extends far beyond the parish in which we live.

#### Invitation

I began this letter by recalling the parish in which I lived as a boy and young man. Also, I remembered the various parishes I served as a priest and visited as a bishop. What are the parishes in which you have lived? Recall each one. Give thanks for the blessings of each. Think back to how you personally helped bring life to your parish because you were a part of it.

Think of your present parish. Appreciate the ways it enriches your life. Broaden your vision of what your parish can be and how you, with others, can help it live that vision.

Do all of this with a prayerful spirit. You will be glad you did - and so will others in your parish.

#### Reflection

The name of my parish is St. Joseph, Sacred Heart, Immaculate Conception. In the final analysis, however, the name of every parish is Jesus the Christ.

Jesus of Springfield, Jesus of Cape Girardeau, Jesus of Joplin, Jesus of Mountain View, Jesus of southern Missouri.

To name a parish St. Joseph, Sacred Heart, or Immaculate Conception is a traditional Catholic practice. Such names, in a unique way, simply reflect an individual article of human truth about the encyclopedic God made man, Jesus.

The parish is Jesus in today's towns and cities.

Incarnating Jesus, the parish heals, comforts, teaches the good news of God's love, prays, gathers people together, feeds, seeks new disciples, serves the poor, experiences deaths and resurrections, grows in wisdom and age and grace.

The parish is Jesus at the Jordan, baptized with water and empowered by the Spirit. The parish is Jesus in the upper room where we are companions at the last supper with him and his friends.

The parish is Jesus at Cana, joyful in the vowed love of woman and man. The parish is Jesus at the lake, inviting women and men unafraid of venturing out: "Come follow me."

The parish is Jesus in the crowded house, saying to those with paralysis of soul: "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace." The parish is Jesus at the home of Peter's mother-in-law, curing her illness with the ointment of his power.

In one way after another after another after another the parish is Jesus, the Christ, in today's towns and cities.

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