

God Has Plans for Your Parish – Are you Leading Accordingly?

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One of the great blessings of my job is travelling to parishes throughout the archdiocese and connecting with the various pastors and lay leaders. It's a beautiful thing to hear the passion and pride when they talk about "their parish." They personally identify with that particular place, and feel a deep sense of belonging. They feel profound ownership over what happens there.

This sense of parish ownership is, indeed, a beautiful thing! But it does have a potential dark side. Ownership can lead us in the direction of things like **possessiveness, control, and a kind of tribalism**. Let me explain. The dark side of taking possession of "our parish" is to think that it "belongs to us." We can forget that every parish belongs first and foremost to Jesus and His Universal Church.

Parish ownership can also tempt us to think that we are the primary "drivers" of the parish. We think that we are the leaders, and we need to move the parish in the direction we think it should go. After all, someone has to lead! This temptation supplants the truth that Jesus is the only leader, and he has unleashed his Holy Spirit to guide, drive, and move the parish according to the Father's will.

Thirdly, the dark side of ownership is the exclusivity associated with tribalism. This is the idea that there are "insiders" and "outsiders." You are either one of us or you are not, and if you are not, we do not want you. This creeps into our hearts in the subtlest of ways. "Why are you in my pew?" "That's not how we do it around here." "Those Christmas-only people don't know what they are doing."

Tribalism creates a closed community of the "local chosen," and subverts the essential mission of the Church, which is to be evangelical. Like Jesus, we are called and sent to be on mission, reaching out to everyone, especially the lost, with the joyful saving news of his Gospel. The Church of Jesus is "outwardly oriented" not a carefully curated and safely enclosed museum piece.

So what are the leadership implications of all of this? How do we lead to counteract these ownership temptations of possessiveness, control, and tribalism? **I would recommend special attention and discipline be given to our language, our prayer, and our focus.**

Regarding our language, we can get in the habit of saying things like "Jesus' Church here in Beaver Dam," or "Jesus' life and mission at St. Mary Parish," or "Jesus calling us to discipleship through the Waukesha Catholic Community." Words have the power to create a culture in the parish that points more toward Jesus than to us. Let's always focus on Jesus as our ultimate leader.

How we pray as leaders can help us resist the temptation to see ourselves as in control. Let's storm the heavens with prayers like these: "Jesus, show us what direction you want for this parish," and "Jesus, form us as your disciples so we can lead well," and "Into your hands we surrender this parish, let it be done unto this parish according to your word." As we pray is how we actually believe and lead.

Our best antidote to tribalism is embracing a primary leadership focus on those not in our pews. This is a game changer because it redirects how we foster an evangelizing stance among those inside our walls, and challenges us to identify bridge-building strategies to those who are outside. Then we fully embrace the missionary call of Jesus to "Go, therefore, and make disciples" (Matthew 28:16-20).