

Exhortation for the Year Ahead – 2012-13

In many places, the Scriptures show us a pattern in which God deals with his people by requiring them to let go of what is familiar and reasonable from a human perspective and to place what they have in God's hands, trusting in his word. For example, God told Abraham, the father of faith, to leave his homeland and all that was familiar to him and move to an undisclosed new home that would be shown to him. God also promised him a son, through whom all the earth would be blessed; but after he received that son, God asked Abraham to offer him as a sacrifice. This directive went counter to human intuition; yet, it was through Abraham's willingness to give to God and let go of what he had that the promise was fulfilled. Similarly, the widow of Zarephath mentioned in 1 Kings 17, was asked by the prophet Elijah to give him the last of her food in the midst of a famine. She did so, and God miraculously provided for her and her son, because she was obedient to the prophet's word.

Other examples could be cited, but the point is that God's people actually benefit when they abandon all to him; and by letting go of what is precious, they ultimately gain back what is given up and even more. In other words, the kingdom of God functions contrary to worldly wisdom, which says the way to gain is to hold on to what one possesses. Jesus summarizes this counter-intuitive principle when he says, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39, ESV).

Now, we often apply this principle to ourselves individually; but I ask you also to consider this in connection with the corporate lives of our parishes as well. If God's blessing is going to rest on our churches, we must let go of them in the way that we are describing. This is not as easy to do as it may seem. Each of us loves his or her parish and wants

what is best for it; but love for the parish easily can become a desire to preserve things just as they are. No one would say that he is opposed to the growth of his parish; but with growth comes change and with change comes the loss of a degree of control. In order to gain a healthy parish, we must be willing to let go of the status quo and be open to the change that God is bringing about.

This type of change also concerns the way in which we view evangelism and the parish's relation to the community. Changing attitudes in society toward religion in general and Christianity in particular require us to let go of previously held assumptions about how the church fulfills her mission. Many have suggested that we live in a post-Christian age. This does not mean that the gospel message and Christian faith are things of the past; but it does mean that society and culture have passed from accepting Christianity as the standard for its structure and values. While this is not something that has happened overnight, rather, it has been a steady progression, throughout the twentieth century, nevertheless this progression is being felt ever so acutely in our present time.

Most notably, this cultural shift impacts the way that the local parish speaks to the surrounding community in which it is located. For example, it was assumed a generation or two ago, that most everyone would attend church of some denomination. Because any respectable person was a church attendee, the only question was where a particular person went to church. Churches accordingly positioned themselves in such a way as to "advertise" those aspects of parish life that would be attractive to someone searching for a church. Church outreach was centered upon "letting them know that we are here," because if people know we are here they are likely to walk in and see what we have to offer.

Although there will always be a certain number of Christians who remain in the category of “church shopper,” that segment of the population is shrinking. Banking our outreach effectiveness on this pool of people alone is not wise nor is it being faithful to our church’s mission to reach the lost for Christ. Increasingly, the number of people who see any need to go to church or have desire to do so is shrinking. This is especially true among the younger generation. The assumption is no longer, “Where should I go to church?”; rather, it is, “Why should I go to church?”; or in the case of many, any thought at all about church is absent from their thinking.

The health of our parishes demands that we let go of those previously held assumptions that were part of a cultural context that is quickly disappearing; and we must be willing to embrace a parish lifestyle that may be uncomfortable or at least unfamiliar. First of all, we must pray fervently for the conversion of souls. I am not saying that this is something new. We have always prayed for the lost; however, when we are faced with the spiritual barriers that now challenge us, we need to be specially intentional and focused on asking the Holy Spirit to shine upon the hearts and minds of those who sit in darkness. Secondly, we must be intentional about developing relationships of friendship and trust with those outside the church. Again, this is not something entirely new, but is something that requires a higher level of commitment. If my neighbor sees no relevance or importance in the Christian faith, or worse yet, blames the ills of society on its Christian past, the only way to break through that obstacle is to exhibit personally the love and witness of Christ.

This change of emphasis requires a change in how each of us participates in the life of the parish. It is no longer sufficient (if it ever was) to simply advertise church services or to write a check to help

support the new program that the parish is creating. Evangelism is not the exclusive job of the rector or the youth minister. Certainly, the clergy are not exempt from evangelism, but they cannot do it alone. In fact, the most effective people in reaching those people outside the faith are those who live, work and play among them. But this requires time and patience. Advertising for a special church event or special worship service, if successful, yields instant results: the date is set and the people show up. The kind of outreach of which I am speaking requires an investment of time, perhaps years, before the results are seen. One does not gain the trust and confidence of a person who sees the church and Christians as alien entities by handing her a tract or flyer.

On the Diocesan level, we are in the process of thinking about how we are assisting the parishes to do the work of the ministry in this ever-changing cultural context. In particular, I have asked the leadership of the Diocese to begin thinking about the committee structure that we currently have and whether there is a better way to organize them, so that the Diocese may genuinely support the things that our parishes need to do in order to be effective witnesses to the gospel of Christ. At this Council, we have opportunity to hear from those involved in one aspect of this work, namely, the Bishop's Youth Advisory Committee. This is a group of people who have been discussing seriously the ways in which the Diocese may be a resource to help parishes reach and minister to younger people in the midst of this paradigm shift that I have mentioned. I hope you will take advantage of this group's work by attending the question and answer forum scheduled for Thursday evening.

As the Diocese is making this effort, I am asking our parishes to begin a similar process of discussion among their local leadership. This will involve, "What are the purposes and goals of the various ministries of the parish? On what principles are they based? Do they assume an old

model of the passive presence of a parish in the community, or do these ministries provide a basis for parishioners to make personal connection with people in the community? Are we equipping our laity with the instruction and encouragement that they need in order to reach out to their neighbors and co-workers and bridge the gap between church and society?"

Be assured of my continued prayers for you and my willingness to advise and assist you in any way that I can. I truly believe that if we are willing to take the step of faith, which commits all that we have into his hands, his gracious blessing will surely follow.

Now unto him that is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us; unto him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21).