

“Gathered, Gifted and Sent in His Name”
A Pastoral Letter on the Meaning and Mission of the Parish
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As Jesus taught and prepared his followers for his departure to the Father, He said two very significant things: *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I shall be there with them” (Mt. 18, 20)*; and: *“Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always, yes, to the end of time” (Mt. 28, 19-20)*.

These words were addressed directly at those first disciples of His who were to become the foundation stones of His Church. These apostles understood from the very beginning that they were called to be a people, a community that by the love and care of its members for one another would be the most powerful witness of Christ’s on-going presence in the world. Yet this community was not meant to center its attention on itself so as to ignore the needs of those outside. It was meant to be a community **gifted** and **sent** to the world in order to save it. The Church is therefore always anxious to reach out and seek to bring Christ’s healing and reconciling words and actions to those who most need His love and mercy and to welcome new members that they too might gather around the table of the memorial of his redemption and share in the full sacramental life.

Where the Church’s mission must be most visible and most alive is in the parish. The parish is the privileged place where people are *“gathered in His name”* and where they receive the challenge to go to the world as active participants in God’s plan and as living witnesses to the one Lord.

It is the parish where the Church is actualized, made real, visible and tangible. On the parish level the vast majority of Catholics experience Church and are given the opportunity to be active in the Church’s mission. It is at the parish where Jesus is encountered and where the Catholics’ personal relationship with Him is nurtured and made fruitful. It is at the parish that inter-personal relationships are born and lived out as in a family. There the members of the parish interact, mutually support, and sacrifice their time and resources for one another. Finally, it is in the parish that the Church is made believable and where it wins the trust of those outside. Above all it is in the parish where we gather to hear God’s word that sharpens our Gospel vision; where we eat the body and drink the blood that revitalizes our strength to continue our journey together as pilgrims in a land that is not our permanent home.

As a matter of fact, the word designating God’s people in the Old Testament is PAROKIA, which refers to a people in a sojourn in a foreign country. St. Peter referred to this concept when he

admonishes Christians to live righteous lives, *“as long as you are living away from your home” (I Pt. 1, 17)*. In other words, we belong to a community whose true country and citizenship is not in this world but in the horizons beyond those we now see. The parish serves as a reminder that we presently live as pilgrims and that we are not alone in our journey through life. We travel together, encouraging one another, binding the wounds of those who get hurt along the way, reminding one another of the promises made by the One Who keeps promises and Who is always faithful and Whose love is forever.

We need to grow in our understanding of the parish as a gracious gift from God, as the unique instrument of grace in our lives. This letter is meant to help us deepen our love and concern for our parishes. I hope that this reflection will lead to a renewed effort at making our parishes more alive with the enthusiasm that comes from the Holy Spirit, that special source of zeal and energy for those of us who recognize ourselves as extensions of God’s embrace of love. It is my hope that our parishes will more and more develop the ideals the Second Vatican Council set for parishes, especially that of closer collaboration on all levels of Church membership and responsibility: the laity, religious and clergy.

I. **A People Gathered in His Name**

Church teaching of our times emphasizes the parish as a community: The 1983 Code of Canon Law defines the parish as *“a definite community of the Christian faithful” (Canon 515)*. In the Decree on the Laity Vatican II refers to the parish as a *“Church community.”*¹ At the same time, the Council adds that the parish and the diocese are intimately connected: *“The parish is a cell of the diocese,”*² the image or miniature of the diocese and of the universal Church.³ The diocese and the whole Church are reflected more clearly in the parish than in other Church entities.

A. The Priest in the Parish

Priests, the Council teaches: *“Represent the bishop in each local assembly. With him they are associated in all trust and generosity and in part they take upon themselves his duties... and discharge them in their daily toils. As the priests sanctify and govern under the bishop’s authority that part of the Lord’s flock entrusted to them, they make the universal Church visible in their own locality and lend powerful assistance to the building of the whole body of Christ.”*⁴

B. The Challenge of Unity in Our Parishes

The Council points out that at the parish out of many we are made one. While there are many human differences because of racial, national and ethnic origin, because of age, because of social or educational background—the parish brings togetherness out of the array of different people.⁵

In our diocese parishes are not only made up of a variety of people, but they are also very different from one another. We have parishes where English is predominant; in others Spanish is ordinarily used. Most of our parishes are bi-lingual. We are blessed with one where the Apache language is still maintained. A majority of our parishes

are located in small towns and rural areas, but some are urban and located in our larger cities, such as in Las Cruces, Roswell, Hobbs, Carlsbad and Alamogordo. Many parishioners are native to Southern and Southeastern New Mexico, others arrived here from Mexico, from other parts of our state and from different parts of the United States and the world. Our diocese is indeed blessed with the gifts that our parishioners bring from so many Catholic traditions. These traditions are one more clear manifestation of the Universal Church present in our midst.

We must make sure that services are provided to everyone according to their language and cultural needs. Our task as Church is to evangelize, to meet people in their cultural environment in a way that they can best find Christ. This complex task will require much tact in helping each person feel their importance and make their contribution to the total life of the parish. In this regard, parishes are challenged to provide opportunities for celebrating, sharing and working together.

C. The Eucharist as Expression of Unity

This unity and coming together of the parish reaches its maximum expression around the table of the Lord. The Eucharist is the most intensive event of the Church and is meant in a most special way to be celebrated in a local community.⁶ At the Eucharist, celebrated by the local congregation, the unity for which we all yearn takes place. Moreover, when the local Church celebrates the Eucharist it is doing it in and with the Universal Church. Indeed all the other sacraments celebrated in the community are expressive and effective in the strengthening of the parish family. In those areas where the Eucharist is not available because of the shortage of priests, Sunday worship and other forms of prayer express the unity of faith and mission.

II. A People Gifted

Every parish is gifted with all its members. All have something to bring to parish life. Many bring talents, not only of a material nature, but also spiritual, intellectual and organizational, administrative and leadership skills. It would be a serious mistake for the leadership of a parish to bypass the enormous potential present in those who make it up.

The central leader in the parish is the pastor, but he does not have to be the only leader. In fact, it is generally recognized that a leadership style centered on the pastor alone is no longer acceptable. In a recent survey, four qualities surfaced that give parishes a reputation of being good parishes:⁷

1. excellency in liturgy and preaching
2. helping people to cope with the practical concerns of life (e.g. family and marriage problems, illness and death in the family)
3. a more shared style of leadership
4. a variety of opportunities for people to participate

Numbers 3 and 4 are those qualities we now turn to in our consideration of parish life.

Among the urgent needs today are structures that will best enhance the growth and development of a parish, its role in the total Church, and the interaction of its members. The mission of the Church pertains to all its members: clergy, religious and laity, men and women. Structures are needed that will facilitate participation in decision-making in the various parish ministries including those of worship, service in the wider community, religious education and evangelization.

Every parish needs a parish council or a parish advisory group. Training sessions for the council members in the necessary skills is essential. The diocese is ready to provide training and give direction to any parish seeking the organization of a parish council.

The Code of Canon Law mandates that each parish have a finance council, apart from the parish council. This finance council is to be composed of carefully selected parishioners, skilled in the area of finance in order to assist the pastor in the administration of parish goods (**Canon 537**).

It must not be forgotten that the pastor is not simply another voting member of the parish or finance council nor an employed administrator. He is the representative of the bishop and the person who in a special way represents the reality of the Universal Church. His task is to remind the faithful that everything we do is for the Kingdom and for the glory of God. He empowers people to share the gifts that they have received for the common good.

Each parish will strive to receive from and contribute to other parishes through the Vicariate structure the resources that will enhance its ability to continue the work of Christ.

III. A People Sent in His Name

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn. 20, 21). These words are meant for the Church who is to continue the mission of Christ on earth. We as Church are the *“Community of the Sent,”* of those who have a task to perform in the world, who have a mission to carry out as a mandate from the Lord. It is in the context of our parishes that we are called to fulfill our mission. The parish serves as a constant reminder that we are all called either to the Church’s ministry or to be witnesses to Christ in the world.

It is true an individual can be called to do private and isolated acts of an apostolic nature, but the Church as Church has been entrusted with Christ’s mission. The Council refers to the *“group apostolate”* of Christian believers as having a pre-

eminent place in the divine plan to save the world.⁸

It is as a people that we are to reach out and invite others to be part of Christ's Body. Thus, it is urged by the Council that the laity and the clergy create a unique *"cooperative association for the unfolding of Christ's work on earth."*⁹ When such shared responsibility for the Church's ministry is carried out, the fullness of the apostolate is seen. When clergy, laity and religious work together, the apostolate becomes most fruitful and the parish becomes a joy to behold.

A. The Social Responsibility of the Parish

The Council, when it speaks of the parishes' mission, consistently invites the laity to take its rightful place in the activity of the Church. *"The laity should accustom themselves to working in the parish in close union with their priests."*¹⁰ Then the Council clarifies what parishes should be about: *"...bringing to the Church community their (the laity's) own and the world's problems as well as questions concerning human salvation, all of which should be examined and resolved by common deliberation."*¹¹

What this means is that the parish has to be concerned with the real life issues that occur in the outside world, beginning with those things which immediately have an impact on the life of the local community and then with those that affect the lives of people in other parts of our region and of the world.

The Council underscores that the task of salvation is not just of souls, but of people; that while here on earth we have no abiding city, we must not, therefore, shirk our earthly responsibilities. Religion does not consist in worship alone or in the discharge of certain moral responsibilities. There is no room in the Christian way for a split between faith in God and life on earth.¹²

The faithful of our parishes have the power to cause and influence changes that will bring about a more just and peaceful society. They can help identify issues, convene people, and sponsor efforts to better the wider community in which our parishes are located. We should be alert to the occasions that arise when we can collaborate with other people including those of other religious traditions in the eradication of any evil that takes away from the dignity of all peoples. Questions and problems that affect our world are not to be excluded from our parishes' agendas, to do so would be a serious sin of omission. Parishes would do well to set up commissions on peace and justice to keep the parish informed and prepared to act as needs arise.

B. Religious Education in The Parish

Pope John Paul II points out that the parish community must continue to be *"the prime mover and pre-eminent place for catechesis."*¹³ Most parishes in our diocese have set up religious education programs, from pre-school to high

school, young adult and adult programs. Efforts should continue to improve the programs through appropriate catechist formation, and the setting aside of parish funds adequate to respond to these needs. The diocese has a growing resource center of materials at the disposal of parish and religious education programs.

What is needed in almost all our parishes is proper training programs for liturgical ministries including music ministries, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, lectors, servers and ministers of hospitality (ushers).

We are happy that each year a few more parishes and parishioners implement the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (R.C.I.A.). This official rite of the Church is the normative way adults enter the Church (**Canon 851**). I urge the parishes who have not yet introduced the R.C.I.A. to take measures to offer the re-discovered catechumenate that was so alive in the early Church to new members.

C. Youth Ministry and Family Life in the Parish

From our early months as a diocese, we saw a need for youth and family ministry. Our parishes are urged to take advantage of the many programs organized by our youth and family life office. My special concern is for the young person alienated from family, church, school and society. We must seek ways of reaching out to these troubled young people who need the skilled parishioners who are willing to give their time to minister to them. The same can be said of the divorced and separated parishioners. In their hour of need, the Church through peer ministers must be present with compassion and understanding.

D. The Parish and Vocations

The future of our parishes depends on the continuation of the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments. For this we need priests. We are happy that we are being blessed with seminarians, but we need more if all our parishes are to be assured of priests in the future. It would be to our advantage if in each parish we were to have a "*vocations council*" that would keep the issue of priestly and religious vocations alive at the local level and that would organize activities to promote vocations, especially to the priesthood and religious life.

E. Small Christian Communities

In our dream of the future parish, a concept that offers great promise is that of small Christian communities. These provide the opportunity for a deeper and more personal sharing and reflection on God's presence in our lives. Where these communities have taken root, they have been a real source of parish renewal and revitalization. I invite each parish to seriously consider the formation of small faith sharing groups.

F. Parish Organizations

The active presence of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the many ministries that are alive in our parishes. Apostolic movements such as the Cursillo and the Charismatic Renewal are strong in our diocese. The Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Daughters of America, the Legion of Mary, the Serra Club and the St. Vincent de Paul Society are likewise active in our diocese. We pray and hope that all our ministries, movements and Catholic organizations proceed under the diligent guidance of our pastors. Pastors should continually be extra zealous not only in the proper formation in correct doctrine of lay leaders but also in the development of leadership skills.

Conclusion

As Mary and the Apostles were gathered at Pentecost awaiting the empowerment of the Spirit and the authorization to spread the Good News, we too stand on the threshold toward the future parish. Let us see ourselves gathered, gifted and sent to make our presence as Church a source of blessing to the world.

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Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross

¹ *Decree on the Laity 9*; in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press 1966).

² *Ibid*, 10.

³ Vorgrimler, Herbert ed., *Commentary of the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder 1967) Vol. I, p.117.

⁴ *Constitution on the Church 28*; in *The Documents of Vatican II*, op.cit.

⁵ *Decree on the Laity 10*, op.cit.

⁶ Riepe, C. "Parish," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia X* (New York: McGraw-Hill Company 1967) p. 1019.

⁷ NCCB Committee on the Parish, *Parish Renewal, A Resource Book for Dioceses* (Washington, DC 1982)

⁸ *Decree on the Laity 18*, op.cit.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Constitution on the Church 43*; in *The Documents of Vatican II*, op.cit

¹³ John Paul II. *Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in Our Time 67* (Boston: St. Paul Editions 1979)