



MY PARISH, YOUR PARISH

Fr. Joseph M. Horn

Clustering Maximizes Resources—Including Me!

For the past three of my eleven years of priesthood, I have been the pastor of a newly merged parish called Holy Family in Memphis, Michigan. The merger of parishes is becoming a familiar phenomenon for Catholics throughout the Archdiocese of Detroit.

In July 2004, Holy Family began as a cluster of Holy Rosary Parish in Smiths Creek, St. Philip Neri Parish in Columbus and All Saints Parish in Memphis. These parishes are made up primarily of rural farming families. (How rural? One of the announcements at a weekend Mass read, “Shirkey’s cows are loose; if anyone has seen them please call the farm.”) Each parish belonged to a tight knit community having its own distinct identity strengthened by the social activity provided by the parish.

The merger didn’t just happen to us. We entered into it as part of the Together in Faith process initiated by the archdiocese.

By now, most Catholics should be familiar with Together in Faith, a self-evaluation tool that engages each parish to ask three strategic questions to determine its own viability. Honest answers to those questions rendered the conclusion that, though we were viable as individual parishes, we could build a stronger future if we shared our resources. Clustering seemed the best option. We could share our resources and still maintain our parish identities.

And so we clustered and remained so for three years. What exactly were the resources we were able to share?

We combined the parish bulletins and combined a few commissions, but the main resource being “shared” was the pastor. There were multiple parish councils to attend, two finance committees, two religious formation programs, two worship commissions and two separate offices. It was a lot like Noah’s ark: There was two of everything—and one pastor.

Our little community was feeling the pressures of the priest shortage. The five weekend Masses were spread over three parishes twelve miles apart. The Masses were scheduled one half hour apart to allow drive time from one parish to the next. This did not include the wedding, funeral and confession schedules.

Hopping from Mass to Mass wasn’t working; I was celebrating Mass but losing touch with the people I served. It was humbling to finally admit that, even with the help of senior priests, the weekend Mass schedule was oppressive.

Soon after the clustering, I realized it was time for a “come to Jesus” conversation with my parishioners. Something had to give because I couldn’t give anymore. We needed to rise above the parochialism that kept each individual parish apart and do something radical to become one community.

The Together in Faith committee was given the task of bringing about the merger of our three-parish cluster. The merger would allow us to combine—not just share—all our resources, create a reasonable Mass schedule and reduce the number of parish mandated meetings. All this was done to preserve the well-being of their pastor.

In May 2007, we merged and became Holy Family Parish. In the process, we have had to make difficult sacrifices. There have been losses and misunderstandings along the way. For my own mistakes throughout the process I seek forgiveness and ask for understanding. It has driven me to prayer, and I have learned from it.

My experience of living in a merged parish inspires me to pray for the endeavors of the vocations office. Surprisingly, the priest shortage has had a positive effect on vocations in my parish. Recently, two young men attended a vocation dinner at Sacred Heart and one more has come forward sharing an interest in becoming a priest.

My advice to any priest, deacon or lay person in any of today’s parishes is this: don’t sacrifice your prayer life for anything. When your prayer life is intact, all your work is blessed and the people you serve feel it. When your prayer life is non-existent, they can sense that, too.

I am finishing this article while convalescing after having cardiac catheterization. I am forty-three years old and didn’t see that coming. This is all the more reason to pray, to live healthy and to do your best everyday.

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