

12 Characteristics of a Modern Catholic Parish (exerpts from a bulletin article of April, 2010)

Some have been asking, “When will we make preparations for the new parish? No one contacted me yet.” While a great deal of background work has been done, the actual merging process has not yet started and will not start until May. Some are asking about their groups, like Vincent de Paul or the food center. Decisions will be made about those after the parishes merge.

A new parish, Blessed Trinity, is starting in our neighborhood. This can be an exciting time. It is not often that we get the opportunity to start a parish from scratch. Instead of asking questions like, will our new parish continue bingo, it is better to ask, “What does a vibrant parish consist of?” and then build ministries around those goals. I would list 12 characteristics of a modern Catholic parish.

All who enter experience welcome and hospitality. Parish doors swing wide open to convey a hospitable spirit. The stranger becomes a guest. People linger and engage one another. Those with different needs are accommodated by rides to church, rooms to change babies, wheelchair seating amongst the community. Parishes not only welcome new people, but new ideas and fresh ways of doing old business. Changes that new people bring into any system are met with a flexible and hospitable spirit. And all will be new at Blessed trinity.

Liturgy inspires full, active and conscious participation and offers an experience of God. Liturgical ministers who are well informed in their roles invite all community members to celebrate together. Music, responsive to the liturgical seasons as well as cultures and languages that make up different assemblies, moves the hearts and spirits of those who play, listen and sing. Relevant preaching touches hearts and sends forth all participants nourished and challenged. Vibrant liturgies invite people to linger with God yet propel them into the world and the needs found there.

Parishioners recognize their parish mission. They have seen the parish mission statement lived and know their connection to the broader Gospel mission. Their mission inspires and empowers them to be fully alive and awake in the world as a member of a body that has a purpose. One church advertises on public radio with these words, “Our church seeks God, practices justice and creates community.” One does not need to be a member or a visitor to know that church’s purpose.

Leadership is shared. Parishes that offer opportunities and responsibilities for many to take ownership of its ministries create an enthusiastic and mutual spirit. Leaders listen to people’s concerns and communicate consistently, engaging members in the community’s life. Leaders rotate. A variety of people head up organizations. When leadership cannot be found, it is often because the group has outgrown its mission or the mission has been usurped by an individual. A constant change at the top guarantees that new members will be joining. .

Members are recognized as gifted and called forth to use their gifts. Parishes that routinely use their stewardship process to identify and invite skills and talents to be developed in a parish life reap multiple rewards. Parishes that identify what the people need for a ministry and specifically tell someone what they can offer foster confidence and motivation parishioners’ sense of collaboration grows. Parishes that work at this do not have the same people doing all the work.

Faith is nurtured. Whether it is education programs, seasonal missions, youth activities, programs for persons in various ages or walks of life (the list is endless), formation is a vital and active part of every facet of the parish. Opportunities to nurture the spiritual dimension and deepen the sense of being called to love as disciples are constantly cultivated. The powerful gifts of Catholic tradition and social teachings of the church are apparent and are studied and pondered.

Outreach to the body of Christ is practiced. A parish that is alive faces the world with all the agonies, inequities and challenges found among God's people and responds. People who find themselves in need, lost, marginalized, discriminated against, vulnerable or sick are fed, clothed, nourished and welcomed. Members who are absent from the community by illness, college, military duty or imprisonment are still connected to the body and given loving attention. Churches grapple with multiple issues; immigration, homelessness, neglected neighborhoods, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, addictions, environmental irresponsibility. The list of concerns is extensive, but vibrant parishes reach out and serve as disciples have been called.

There is a plan for a sustainable and responsible future. Members actively engage one another and envision their role and collective responsibility for the future. Stewardship for one's personal assets, church facilities, and global and financial responsibilities is integrated into parish systems, programs and structures.

Communal life abounds. A vibrant parish gathers people for formation, outreach, study and fun. The time for care by a loving community happens every day: birth, illness, death, and life's difficulties come to all. Members connected communally find opportunities to engage even beyond themselves into neighborhood undertakings or ecumenical efforts.

A vibrant parish doesn't take itself too seriously. Active involvement means people will make mistakes, get angry, suffer disappointment, undergo hurt feelings, forget to call and so on. In these instances laughter is often the best medicine and a sense of humor goes a long way to heal brokenness.

Evangelization happens. Parishes that truly believe they have found meaning wish to share that joy with others. Conscious and purposeful invitations to the unchurched and non-practicing Catholics are made throughout the year.

Baptism's vocational call is cultivated. Baptism calls all to ministry and discipleship. This sacrament echoes over all members of a community, inviting a response of generous hearts and lives. Vibrant communities are places where members are encouraged in their call, supported in the discernment and find sustenance as they respond.

Imagine the sign we might see if Blessed Trinity were such a 12-fold parish, pulsing with life, humming with energy, unleashing the Spirit like a wildfire spread across the land.

So, are you involved in something now? Altar and Rosary? Scouting? Soup kitchen? Bereavement ministry? How does your involvement fit in with a vibrant parish and what shape might that take as these ministries merge into the new Church of the Blessed Trinity?