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## **Parish as a Center for Forming a Spiritual People**

### INTRODUCTION

This article offers a reflection on the contexts within which spiritual formation occurs (or can occur) in a Roman Catholic parish. The author writes from the perspective of nearly thirty years of ministry in Catholic parishes, the last twelve as pastor at St. Rose of Lima Parish in Gaithersburg, Md., a suburb of Washington, D.C. The thoughts that are offered here, while certainly influenced by an ongoing attempt to remain theologically literate, are primarily the distillation of the author's actual praxis of parish ministry. Critical reflection on that praxis has resulted in several insights about spiritual formation in the parish that are rock-solid; others are offered with a high degree of confidence, but may not find universal agreement; still others are personally held convictions, but will certainly be subject to debate by many. These insights are offered first in the form of nine theses by way of summary, and then each is developed in further detail:

- Strong ritual, carefully prepared and celebrated well, remains the primary "school of faith" for the vast majority of Catholics.
- The Word of God shapes the spirituality both of individuals and of the community itself when a parish encourages and helps its members to read, pray, discuss, understand, proclaim and apply the Scriptures in the context of their daily lives.
- A parish is a more effective place of spiritual formation when its catechetical efforts consistently implement, at every level, a comprehensive philosophy of catechesis that emphasizes (trans)formation in addition to religious literacy.
- The parish provides an important context for spiritual formation when it makes abundantly available a variety of opportunities for service, both in ecclesial ministries and in outreach to the poor and marginalized. The potential for parishioners being formed through these involvements is maximized when they are encouraged and supported by (1) personal invitation, (2) preparation that attends to both technical skills and spirituality issues, and (3) regular opportunities to reflect on and integrate the significance of their participation in light of our shared Catholic faith.

- A parish that seeks to be a center for forming a spiritual people will make available to its members multiple opportunities to receive training in the ways of prayer and discernment.
- Spiritual formation happens at deeper levels when parish leaders make a deliberate decision to define membership in terms of an intentional faith model rather than “cultural Catholicism.”
- A parish community where the social bonds among its members are strong, and where there is a shared vision that builds a clear sense of identity and mission, touches the lives of its parishioners in deep and lasting ways.
- Encouraging parishioners to offer public witness to their spiritual experiences inspires others by offering positive role models of lived faith. Such witnessing also results in a more consciously owned faith on the part of those who give the testimony.
- The structures of leadership and governance that exist within a parish represent an operative ecclesiology and are formative of the spirituality of its members.

#### STRONG RITUAL

The ancient adage that liturgy is the “school of faith” has received one of its most provocative contemporary restatements in the U.S. Bishops’ document *Music in Catholic Worship*, where they state: “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations weaken and destroy it” (USCC, 1983: #6). The truth of this insight cannot be overstated. For better or worse, the primary spiritual formation experience that most Catholics receive most of the time is their participation at Sunday Eucharist. Anthropologists have amply documented the formative power of ritual. A simple reflection on how often musical jingles are used in advertising will remind the reader that Madison Avenue’s PR geniuses have made billions by exploiting the power of ritual music to sell products. The implications of these realities for those concerned with faith formation in a parish should be obvious.

Robust symbols used in strong rituals have an immense impact on the faith of those who participate in Sunday liturgy. Liturgies where the expressive power of symbol is muted miss an irreplaceable opportunity to touch the hearts and minds of those who gather. One example of this is the decision of our parish no longer to celebrate a “routinely scheduled” communal anointing of the sick. Instead, whenever the opportunity presents itself, we anoint at the Sunday Eucharist any member who is facing serious illness. At the laying on of hands, all in the assembly who wish to come forward are invited to do so. The experience of fellow parishioners silently joining the presider in the laying

on of hands is powerful beyond words and has had a deep and lasting effect on our community. It has changed how the suffering of illness is perceived and has made possible a bond with those who suffer that none of us would have thought possible. All this, simply because in our ritual we have trusted the primal power of touch, silence and faith-filled prayer! Good ritual has made solidarity in suffering (with Christ, with others) move from being an abstract to a lived reality, an integral component of our spirituality. We no longer have to “encourage” people to request such public rituals during their illness—they are eager for the prayer of the community, and they seek it out. Even the shy ones who are sick “come out” in public in this manner. Spiritual formation happens through strong ritual.

#### THE POWER OF THE WORD

About ten years ago, the pastoral staff at St. Rose decided to try, in as many ways as possible, to make the Word of God as it is proclaimed in the Sunday readings the center of parish life. We shared a common conviction that the power of the Word to transform lives was foundational to the kind of community we wished to help build. And so, we set about developing strategies that we hoped would ground our common life in the Scriptures that we were hearing proclaimed each week. We were realistic about the massive ignorance of Scripture that has characterized Catholics for centuries. But we were committed to the hope of the Second Vatican Council that “a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963: #51) so that the faithful would experience “the force and power of the Word of God that . . . can serve the . . . children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life” (*Dei Verbum*, 1965: #21).

Intensive work with our lectors to make their proclamation more effective included mandatory preparation sessions with exegetical background to the readings, prayer and discussion over their meaning, as well as skill-building in the art of public proclamation. Efforts were set in motion to make our children’s religious education programs lectionary-based, thus insuring that our youngsters, their parents and their catechists would all grow in understanding how the Word shapes the content of Catholic faith as well as serves as a guide to right living. We took seriously the hope of Paul VI that Sacred Scripture would “be a perpetual source of spiritual life, the chief instrument for handing down Christian doctrine, and the center of all theological study” (*Missale Romanum*, 1969). At all parish meetings—including the weekly staff meeting—instead of beginning with a perfunctory opening prayer, we ask that those present read and pray over and discuss the meaning of one of the Sunday readings. Various Bible study groups

and formats have been offered over the years to increase parishioners' general scriptural literacy. Those in our small faith communities are encouraged to center their gatherings around a proclamation and discussion of the Sunday readings. And, of course, formation of those in our catechumenate is thoroughly lectionary-based.

What has been the long-term impact of these concerted efforts? Gradually, but clearly, we are becoming a people of the Word. The goal will not be met completely in our lifetime; but, more and more, we see people struggling to understand and live the Word they have heard proclaimed on Sunday. Our lectors have a keen sense of their responsibility to understand the spiritual depth of a passage before they approach the ambo to proclaim it. Parishioners expect thoughtful homilies that are based on the readings, and they are not hesitant about entering into dialogue with the homilist after (or, even during) Mass concerning the application of the Word to their daily lives. Even broader discussions of parish policy or future planning that happen at the level of the parish Pastoral Council increasingly reference what parishioners have heard proclaimed in the Sunday assembly as a criterion for discernment and decision-making. Eucharistic ministers to the sick take with them not only Communion but also the text of the Sunday readings, which they proclaim, pray over and discuss with the homebound.

Casual conversations among parishioners often reference how their small faith community came to this or that insight into the Gospel, and how they see the cost of trying to live up to its challenge. Staff members are regularly approached and asked where one can find background materials to help understand the Sunday readings. We still struggle to find good, attractive models for providing our members with an overall scriptural literacy, realizing that a lectionary-based approach is only the beginning of that literacy. Some of our members regularly attend Bible-study at churches of other denominations, and they have shared with us the benefits they receive from immersing themselves in a kind of in-depth study and practical application that is as yet not a common feature of our Catholic approach to Bible study.

#### CATECHESIS THAT EMPHASIZES (TRANS)FORMATION

For more than a generation, our parish praxis has anticipated the assertion of the revised *General Directory for Catechesis* that the catechumenate "is the model of [the Church's] catechizing activity" (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997: #90). From our efforts to implement the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, we have learned that conversion, not just religious literacy, must be the aim of all of our catechetical efforts. A holistic emphasis on message, community, worship and service which has become the hallmark of post-Vatican II documents

describing the essential dimensions of catechesis (NCCB, 1979: #213) means that we understand very broadly the tasks of our catechetical activity. A new paradigm is emerging as more and more we bring consistency to the goals of our diverse efforts at catechesis. Preparation for the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, first Eucharist, first reconciliation, and marriage all follow a “catechumenal model” that is gradual, progressive, developmentally sensitive and wherever possible family-centered and inter-generational. Commitment, conversion, intentional faith and such terms aptly describe the “hidden agenda” of all learning in these diverse contexts. Our approach is frequently as much about evangelization—first proclamation of the Gospel—as it is about passing on the fullness of our Catholic tradition, but this does not mean we are “soft” on doctrine. Rather, we recognize that too often in the past religious literacy was the exclusive aim of catechetical activity, and we do not want to let ourselves off the hook too easily for too little. We strive to make it clear that learning about one’s faith is a life-long process that does not end with confirmation, that our Catholic faith involves moral imperatives, that participation in worship has pedagogical dimensions and ethical implications, and that a praxis of service both within and beyond the Christian community is the natural correlate of one’s baptism into discipleship.

What have been our results? Our members include the “children of the ‘60s” whose flirtation with experiential methods of catechesis often left them ignorant of much of Catholic doctrine. Their children (and grandchildren) are also our parishioners, Generation X, starting their own families now but without the clear sense of Catholic tradition that allowed their elders to rebel so freely against the past. This younger generation often knows they have been cheated, and they are eager to learn (and pass on to their own children) the content of Catholic faith. They are also hungry for a meaningful spirituality, and they seem to “get it” when we offer approaches that combine spiritual formation with basic information about what we Catholics believe. The eclecticism of their spirituality is real; and, to an extent, they are “cafeteria Catholics,” selective about certain moral teachings. But their search is genuine and deep, and a catechetical approach that emphasizes (trans)formation as well as religious literacy seems to be helping them to grow spiritually in significant ways. Their children, our youngest members, also seem to be “getting it” in ways that are promising and truly exciting. Careful ritual catechesis has given them a deep sense of our liturgical tradition, and they are skilled and articulate in situations that call for them to share their faith. The savvy they display at our summer Bible camp speaks well of how much they already know about Sacred Scripture; and their spirituality, although expressed in developmentally appropriate ways, is internalized and impressive to behold.

#### ABUNDANT OPPORTUNITIES FOR SERVICE

Confirmation programs that require young people to do a set number of “service hours” are a wonderful example of new wine in old wineskins, an attempt to place one element of a new paradigm of catechesis into an old and mostly bankrupt model. Such an approach makes “service hours” part of a required curriculum rather than an integral part of the fabric of Christian life. Once confirmation is over, so are the “requirements,” and experience has shown that all too often the newly confirmed cease not only doing service, but attending religious education classes and Mass as well.

A parish should be a place where there is an abundance of opportunities to serve, a place with so many different kinds of service opportunities that virtually every constituency in the parish can readily find something that is possible to do. The message to confirmands and everyone else in the parish must be loud and clear: Baptism is about a life dedicated to service. We do not recruit volunteers; we empower disciples for the life of service which is their birthright. A parish should constantly be about the business of calling its members both to ministry and to mission. Ecclesial ministry serves as the place where one learns the habits of being and even many of the skills that must be carried over into one’s Christian mission “for the life of the world.” Both spiritual formation as well as skill training characterize preparation for the ministries that serve our community. Eucharistic ministers, Pastoral Council members, catechists, greeters at Sunday Mass, members of the Evangelization Commission, in fact all who serve our community are expected to equip themselves for ministry both by appropriate times of spiritual formation and by the hard work needed constantly to improve the skills required for their respective ministries.

The father of two children in our catechumenate (he is a long-time, active member; they had recently come to live with him after a change in custody arrangements) brought his children one Saturday to help out at a very creative outreach effort, in which clothing and furniture were collected in the parish parking lot and then delivered immediately to the needy of our area. At home that night, the father read over the next day’s gospel and reflected with the children on how what they had done was connected with their desire to be baptized disciples of Jesus. His years of involvement in the way our community links service with formation had taught him the importance of integrating such activities into the children’s spiritual journey. He instinctively knew what holistic catechesis is all about, and so he was able to help the children understand more deeply that action for justice is a constitutive dimension of the proclamation (and living) of the gospel.

For better or worse, a parish forms the spiritual values of its members by virtue of how much (or how little) effort it devotes to making

available opportunities to serve in ministry and mission. Where there is little opportunity made available to serve the needs of the community, where there is little organized effort to reach out beyond the parish through initiatives in the areas of direct service, advocacy or experiences of solidarity, then the message is effectively communicated that a life of service is not integral to one's being Christian. On the other hand, a parish community that consistently devotes a significant proportion of its resources (i.e., time, money, staff, volunteer involvements, space, etc.) to service of the poor and marginalized proclaims to one and all that the gospel requires such commitment on the part of Jesus' disciples. Such a proclamation, consistently backed up by action over the long haul, is an extremely effective way to form a spiritual people.

#### TRAINING IN PRAYER AND DISCERNMENT

Paul Philibert has written of the competencies that are required if one is to participate fully and actively in the Church's liturgical action (Philibert, 1987). A parish community has a real responsibility to empower its members with the basic competencies required to live a full life of Christian prayer. In this regard, liturgical prayer clearly enjoys a primacy. Something as simple as having a song leader go over the day's music each week before Mass begins serves as an icon of a much larger commitment to give parishioners all that they need to enter fully into the community's prayer. The skills needed for liturgical prayer are mostly taught by experience, however, and so it is important to celebrate fully and well the entire scope of the Church's liturgy. For example, we have been working for years to help people "own" the Liturgy of the Hours as one of the primal forms of Christian prayer. We always sing the responsorial psalm at Sunday celebrations (even in the gatherings for children's Liturgy of the Word), and over the years we have built up a considerable repertoire of psalmody with which the entire community is familiar.

Adapted versions of Evening Prayer are incorporated into the rhythm of all religious education sessions for children and youth, and a more solemn version of Evening Prayer is regularly offered on a designated weeknight during Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter. Morning Prayer is used during days of recollection and retreat times, as well as at our Saturday morning meetings of the Pastoral Council. On Sundays we are still working at helping the community become more comfortable with extended times of silence (e.g., after readings, homily, Communion), and this continues to be a significant challenge in a parish with many small children.

From time to time a parish needs to offer specific training in other forms of prayer as well. Our people experience both a hunger and a

need for a deeper experience of contemplative prayer. Times of retreat for ministry groups, members of the catechumenate, small faith communities, families and just general parishioners afford a wonderful opportunity to do the deeper formation needed for specific prayer forms. In addition, by offering opportunities for traditional devotions such as the Stations of the Cross, the Rosary, novenas and eucharistic adoration, a community expands and deepens its members' range of comfort with different ways of prayer. Particularly if these devotions are sensitive to the rhythms of the liturgical cycle, they foster rather than compete with the basic liturgical spirituality that every Catholic should possess. Although we have done some work with our Filipino community in restoring traditional devotions, we continue to wrestle with the theological and pastoral issues related to reinstating devotions such as novenas and eucharistic adoration. We recognize the work still ahead of us if we are to help our parishioners embrace these devotions in a way true to the spirit of Vatican II, yet meeting the needs of a piety often formed in the pre-Vatican II era.

Discernment is a very particular experience of prayer that can be developed and strengthened with practice. Spiritual direction is an invaluable resource for those who wish to grow in the ways of discernment, and it ought to be available in every parish community for those who sense a call to deepen their spiritual journey or are in important times of crisis or transition. Today there are increasing numbers of gifted people trained in the art of direction, and the ways it is offered in individual and group settings are likewise expanding. Catechumenal teams are becoming more adept at discerning readiness of those in the catechumenate, and this has led to an overall growth in the conviction that ordinary Catholics can and must practice discernment.

#### MEMBERSHIP DEFINED IN TERMS OF COMMITTED BELONGING

Historians trace the birth of "cultural Catholicism" back to the Edict of Constantine and the triumph of Christendom as a political and social force in the Roman Empire. James Joyce perhaps said it best in describing the Catholic Church as "here comes everybody." The fact is, our Catholic tradition's paradigm for membership has for well over a millennium been tied to cultural, ethnic, social and political factors as much as to personal acceptance of the Christian message and a commitment to live out the implications of discipleship according to the demands of the gospel. Sociologists of religion distinguish between a "believers church" where the criterion of membership is "committed belonging," based on lived faith, and the kind of belonging based on cultural factors that characterizes millions of nominal Catholics the world over. The fact is, countless Catholics still register surprise if any-

one suggests that their claim to a Catholic identity may be inappropriate when they neither participate in worship on a regular basis nor have any involvement in the life of a local Catholic community, nor hold many of the doctrinal positions that constitute orthodox Catholic faith. Their surprise is the result of a paradigm of membership based on cultural Catholicism rather than intentional faith.

Many theologians and pastoral ministers, including the author, are convinced that the vision of Vatican II requires a change in this model. But making a dent in so massive and deeply ingrained a paradigm will require the persistent efforts of many generations and will not come easily to a Church as entrenched as our own. Indeed, many observers these days recognize in the retreat from the vision of Vatican II currently underway, especially in areas of liturgical renewal and ecclesiology, regressive forces symptomatic of a predictable resistance in the face of a significant attempt at systemic change. Given the epochal nature of this change that is underway in our own time, a parish community and its leadership must be quite deliberate (as well as pastorally sensitive) in its attempt to be a change agent within a system in flux. These are some of the specific pastoral strategies being employed by our community to redefine membership in terms of committed belonging rather than cultural Catholicism:

- The catechumenate has been made a pastoral priority and has been given high visibility within the life of the parish, primarily because of the way in which it embodies a redefinition of membership in terms of intentional faith.
- Homilies consistently call parishioners to an owned faith and urge them to make a commitment to the life of the local faith community as an expression of their personal conversion.
- Sacramental preparation programs (for parents of infants to be baptized, for families whose children are preparing for first penance and Eucharist, for youth in the confirmation process, for those engaged to be married, and for all in the catechumenate) are identified as key opportunities to articulate a consistent understanding of sacrament in terms of intentional faith and of membership in terms of active participation.
- An understanding of evangelization has been developed which sees the spiritual renewal of our active members as an essential first step in calling others to faith. An emphasis has also been put on hospitality and active invitation as a practical way for all in the community to share the task of evangelization. A very visible ministry to returning Catholics is a high-profile way of keeping this understanding of evangelization before the community on an ongoing basis.

- A broad understanding of the spirituality of stewardship as a way of life (such as is found in the U.S. Bishops' document *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*) is aggressively promoted through a planned program of formation. Specific requests are made annually by fellow parishioners to make a commitment to sacrificial giving of time, talent and treasure.
- A welcoming/orientation process for newcomers has been developed which stresses the values of committed belonging. As part of the registration process, newcomers are invited to sign a Membership Covenant that spells out the expectations of active participation in our community.

#### STRATEGIES THAT BUILD A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

The sociological study of religion has demonstrated the importance of social bonding in the conversion process. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's masterful study of utopian communities, *Commitment and Community* (Kanter, 1972), is a treasure trove of insight into commitment mechanisms and how they operate in social settings. At St. Rose we try to understand and capitalize upon these understandings of how the human animal is affected by social forces. We provide numerous opportunities for social interaction among parishioners, in our fund raising efforts, at parties, picnics, dances, etc., as well as in more religious contexts such as our small faith communities, retreats and formational gatherings of specific ministry groups. We manifest many of the characteristics of a "greedy organization" which asks for-and gets-proportionately higher levels of commitment from its members.

Parish leaders have tried to learn from the expertise that is available to us in various "secular" contexts. Family systems theory has proven a very fruitful source of insight, thanks to the work of Edwin Friedman (Friedman, 1985). His approach to leadership by attending to one's own self-differentiation as well as to the emotional process within the system has paid off in a more mature, less reactive modal level of functioning among parish leaders and, as a consequence, within the community at large.

We have also learned a great deal about how a successful strategic planning process can build a shared vision in a community, and how enormous the impact of that shared vision can be in mobilizing and focusing the energies of a community around common goals. The work of organizational development theorists such as Stephen Covey (Covey, 1989, 1990) has helped us to become a "learning organization" where leaders are purposeful in their efforts to marshal the community's resources around a powerful and inspiring vision which has been embraced as a guide for all parish efforts. The statement of our vision

("We Are Bread for One Another: *Broken . . . We Gather. Nourished . . . We Reach Out.*) has been a profound source of spiritual nourishment as well as an exceptionally effective organizational tool that has guided the development and implementation of our parish's pastoral plan. Parishioners have a clear sense of the parish's identity, and they know well the common mission that is ours. The intersection of spiritual formation and leadership theory has, for us, provided a significant opportunity for cross-fertilization and mutual reinforcement. Spiritual formation, we have found, happens in better and deeper ways when the organizational/social dynamics of a community's life are functioning in a healthy manner.

#### THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC WITNESS

It is axiomatic that "faith is caught, not taught," and so a parish forms its members in the faith more effectively in proportion to the availability of positive role models and those willing to offer public witness to their faith. We provide numerous opportunities throughout the year for parishioners to speak to the community (usually during the Sunday Eucharist) and share something of their own faith. Neophytes give testimony at all Masses during the Easter season (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday), as do other parishioners who speak about their experience of stewardship (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday) and about how they have come to know the dying and rising of Jesus in their lives (6<sup>th</sup> Sunday). At other times of the year, the entire community hears appeals for participation from those who are part of a small faith community and from those engaged in outreach efforts. Couples have witnessed to their experience of the sacrament of marriage, and even youth returning from weekend retreats have spoken eloquently of the power of their encounter with the Lord on those occasions.

In addition, our small faith community model encourages regular faith sharing among participants by way of mutual support and inspiration. Willingness to share one's encounter with God in Sacred Scripture is so common as to be taken for granted at parish meetings of all sorts. Not surprisingly, the impact of sharing the story of one's spiritual journey is as great on those who do the witnessing as on those who are the listeners. For us, "the power of storytelling" is not a piece of jargon from an abstract description of narrative theology; it is a lived experience, deeply rooted in the fabric of our communal life, and highly effective as a form of spiritual formation.

#### ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES ARE FORMATIVE OF A SPIRITUALITY

We joke today about an earlier generation, when Catholics were expected to "pray, pay and obey." But, in fact, the structures of leadership and governance which characterized the Church in that earlier age did

reinforce a spirituality of docile obedience more than one of creative initiative. Vatican II has called us to a new spirituality, one that emphasizes the common priesthood of the faithful and our call to mission rooted in baptism. The laity are no longer mere helpers of the ordained. They are consecrated disciples of Jesus with their own call and mission in the world. It is no accident that Catholics today hunger for a more participatory model of governance and seek leaders who will inspire and support more than command and control. The operative ecclesiology of a parish is an important element which shapes the spirituality of parish members. Shared leadership tends to call forth the gifts of the faithful much more effectively than an emphasis on hierarchical power and clerical privilege. A controlling and authoritarian pastor who stresses his power over the faithful by virtue of his ordination may help the faithful practice patience and forgiveness, but cultivating a spirituality of empowered discipleship will be an uphill struggle in such a milieu. The paternalism of the patriarchal structures so prominent in the pre-Vatican II Church militated against a mature faith, in which Catholics would assume adult responsibility for their spiritual life.

It is one of the great pastoral challenges of our generation to create structures of leadership and governance that will encourage and support the Catholic faithful in the new spiritual maturity to which Vatican II has called them. Ecclesiology is formative of spirituality, and so we must seek a renewal of parish structures if we are to instill a renewed spirituality in our members. At St. Rose we continually work at becoming more collaborative in our leadership structures. Our professional staff supports the work of two councils (finance and pastoral) as well as nine pastoral commissions, each of which serves to coordinate the efforts of various committees, task forces and ministry groups. We have found that embracing the discipline required for collaborative process is a kind of contemporary asceticism that truly does help to shape a new spirituality.

## CONCLUSION

Something called a “goal fabric,” which I learned about from strategic planning, has helped me to understand how all of these diverse initiatives work together in contributing to the parish as a place of spiritual formation. A goal fabric is an organizing framework which indicates the interlocking relationships that exist among an organization’s vision, goals, objectives, desired outcomes, and implementing actions. The graphic portrayal of these relationships shows how each strategic initiative contributes in multiple ways to the overall vision of the organization. The overlap which the reader surely noted in the descriptions of how our parish attempts to implement the nine key insights is

an indication that we are dealing with a goal fabric approach to spiritual formation.

Taken as an isolated initiative, any one of the areas of concentration would have a more limited impact. But together, with the mutual reinforcement and enhancement that occurs among the various areas, the whole truly is greater than the sum of its parts. My experience has led me to understand better the wisdom of Jesus' teaching about new wine in new wineskins. The spiritual renewal of a parish happens best when a consistent, overall approach is undertaken, rather than piecemeal attempts that falter on their own. The "new Pentecost" of the Church universal for which Pope John XXIII had us pray prior to Vatican II must occur at the most basic level of the parish, working to be a place of spiritual formation for its people. It is the author's hope that the reflections above will offer an example of how one parish has undertaken this work.

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Christmas takes a person into a realm of poignant memory and deep need and maudlin guilt and, since gifts are involved, into the treacherous waters of taste and judgment, but Thanksgiving is a peasant holiday, and good taste has never been part of it. That's why it is such a comfort. All you have to do is sit down to it. . . . You fix a big table full of dinner and plop down and think, Life is good, thank You for this, it could be a lot worse, and I'm grateful it's not. God bless us. More we do not need.

*Garrison Keillor*