



In Joy and Hope

by

Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy

Good parish experiences

As many of you know, I spend most of my weekends in parish communities in Western Washington. For myself, this is bad news and good news. The bad news is that after spending a few days in any of our parish communities, I would love to stay because of the quality of life that I experience over a weekend. Yet, I must move on. The good news is that I have the opportunity to be with countless people in different communities and I learn so much from the people whom I meet.

Though each parish is unique, it is amazing how many parishes share the same characteristics that give them life, purpose and meaning. I thought it would be good to reflect on some of the qualities of parish life that I have found here in the Church of Western Washington.

Hospitality and welcome

When you enter a church for a weekend celebration, you get the first clue of how vibrant a parish community is and can be. People reflect this vitality through a spirit of welcome and hospitality. It is more than words or greetings. Rather, it is a spirit of pride in who they are and why they have come together to celebrate word and sacrament.

In many ways, this spirit of welcome and hospitality is what it means to be "Catholic" in the best sense of the word. Yes, I might be a stranger to some, a person whose picture they may have seen. But I come among people knowing that I am not ordained just for one group of people in a geographical area, but rather for a community of faith and worship where priesthood is essential.

Such hospitality overflows into the ministry people extend in their outreach to the sick, the lonely, the aged. It becomes energizing when it becomes the basis for evangelization and the invitation to others to be part of that community.

Eucharist and liturgy

Celebrating Eucharist with people gives me a real insight into the life of a parish. Our people deeply appreciate the celebration of Eucharist that is reverent, prayerful, and calls them to full, conscious and active participation in their worship of God. There is a powerful difference between communities where people are merely spectators and communities where people truly participate in God's saving action. Liturgical involvement is the sign of the essential involvement of people in parish pastoral councils and parish finance councils.

Parishes in Western Washington have made a commitment to have good liturgy. Well-planned and organized lay involvement characterizes such liturgy. It is an involvement faithful to the church's liturgical guidelines. With good experiences of liturgy come quality music and congregational participation as well as times for silence. It is wonderful to be a part of peoples' lives when they find what they come to church to find: an experience of how God speaks to them in their daily lives and nourishes them with word and sacrament.

[Continued on next page](#)

Good parish experiences

People appreciate priests

At the end of Mass, people often tell me how much they appreciate the priest who serves their parish community. Though the ideal and the hope are to have a resident priest pastor in each community, the declining number of priests today has not made this possible. We are gifted and blessed to have lay persons and deacons appointed to assist in the pastoral care of parishes without resident priest pastors. These pastoral leaders are also deeply appreciated.

People appreciate priests because priests are present to them in the significant moments of their lives such as times of birth, marriage, and death. Priests become the agents of healing through reconciliation and anointing of the sick. In such service to people, the ministry which people offer to them in turn enriches priests.

Education and spirituality

Vibrant parishes also offer people of all ages opportunities to grow in an understanding and appreciation of their faith. A commitment to ongoing education and formation of people to the challenge of the Gospel and an understanding of our faith tradition are but more signs of life and hope.

Parish communities are alive and well which recognize the many options available to people through a genuine Catholic spirituality. Such spirituality is rooted in the Mass and sacraments, but comes alive as well in Eucharistic devotions, Marian devotions, the Charismatic Renewal, spiritual direction, Scripture study, and the broad range of spiritual practices that are part of the life of our church. In all enterprises, whether the construction of a new building, a fund drive, a new program, the vital parish asks the question: "How will this improve the spiritual life of our parish community?"

Other signs of life

This listing of signs of life in a vibrant parish community is far from exhaustive. Vibrant parishes also have a commitment to issues of justice and peace, an outreach to the disenfranchised and marginalized within our society and church, a spirit of collaboration and inclusion, and a commitment to unity with the local archdiocesan church and the universal church as well.

At the heart of vibrant parishes are the people who minister within the community that is first and foremost the community itself, the volunteers and professional staff persons and the religious and clergy who serve the whole community. A vibrant parish encourages and prays for vocations to all ministries in the church, especially to priesthood.

I am blessed by the wonderful experiences I have in serving as bishop of this local church, because in Western Washington, our parishes are very much alive and well. May God's grace and peace be yours.