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Where the true church emerges

NCR Editorial Staff | Mar. 27, 2010

The principle of subsidiarity, said to have its origins in Catholic social teaching, is a fancy way of saying, ?Don?t let it get more complicated than is necessary.? It advocates that things be carried out by the least centralized level of an organization and has been applied to government and management of all sorts of organizations.

Perhaps, then, it would not be too great a leap to apply the principle in one?s search for hope in the church in these times of distress. And that would lead us to the parish, one of the smallest local manifestations most of us will encounter of the larger institution.

In a sentiment that many of us echo when we get talking about the latest dustup or anxieties in the parish, Melissa Nussbaum writes, in this case of the differences over a church remodeling (See story [1]): ?St. Mary?s true ornaments have always been built of the same sturdy stuff as her walls and roof: the people who gather here to pray and to ask for prayer, to praise and to give thanks, to serve God and one another.?

Parishes, for certain, are not trouble-free zones. But for most of us, they serve as islands of solace in these turbulent ecclesiastical times. The Vatican may be, as John Allen reports (See story [2]), in disarray internally. The sex abuse crisis, declared over by one optimistic bishop some years ago, continues its march through the church, through Ireland and into central Europe, advancing perilously close to the papal palace. And a pastor and his retro bishop -- excluding preschool children from school because their parents are gay -- try to push us back to a time when what most mattered in the church was defining who?s in and who?s out.

At ground level in most places, however, the work of the Catholic community goes on not because of priests and bishops but because of rank upon rank of dedicated parishioners and lay ministers, many of them paid employees of the institution.

Pointing out that reality in no way demeans the contributions of the ordained, or their essential place in our ecclesiology. It merely notes the obvious on two levels. First, in the past half century, thanks to the language of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, laypeople have a renewed sense of their place in the church and in its work. Second, the demographic shifts that are well underway and the decrease in the number of ordained personnel to lead parishes and ministries have created an on-the-ground necessity. Laypeople have to step up and take on roles previously reserved for the ordained.

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These new responsibilities are not carried out in isolation. One?s sense of vocation, whether within the institution or beyond, in the wider culture, can only be lived fully out of an experience of community.

That?s where parish enters the picture. It is there that we meet, as Nussbaum puts it, the real riches of the church -- each other, in all of our possibilities and imperfections. Pastors will come and go, but the community remains. It is there -- beneath the din of scandal and dysfunction -- that the true church emerges and engages the works of mercy and compassion.

Stories in this parish series

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- The real jewels of the church [1], by Melissa Musick Nussbaum
- Vatican woes confuse ordinary Catholics [2], analysis by John L. Allen Jr.
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