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Why run the Beaver Island, Mich., story?

by Dennis Coday

NCR Today

I had a high school teacher who was mad about William Blake, the English poet and printmaker who died in 1827. We read his work -- memorizing much of it -- and pored over reproductions of his illuminated engravings. Blake's visions and the connections he found between humanity and divinity were heady stuff for 17-year-olds. He infused us with a sense of mystery and awe. It was great.

Surely among his most quoted lines is the opening stanza of "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

All that to begin to explain why I assigned Brian Roewe to write **the story of Holy Cross Parish on Beaver Island, Mich.** Holy Cross is that grain of sand in which we can see our Catholic world.

I would urge you not see the conflict on Beaver Island as a conflict between one man and a group of parishioners. That would be too easy. If we wanted to, we could fill our pages with stories of parishioners dissatisfied with their pastors. Conversely, we could fill our pages with stories of pastors ill-treated by parishioners. Part of the tragic human condition is that we don't always live up to Jesus' admonition to love one another. For that we all need to seek forgiveness again and again.

The failure on Beaver Island is not the failure of a pastor or a bishop or parishioners. All parties, it seems, have tried their best to work through the difficulties. Sadly, they have reached an impasse. But even that is not the real failure. The failure on Beaver Island is systemic. The people on Beaver Island are caught in a system that stifles creativity and can't generate new ways to solve problems.

Take the names out of the story and look at the core issues. A pastor has been assigned to a parish with which he is incompatible -- for whatever reasons. What can be done? Apparently nothing. The diocese is short on priests -- everyone is doing double duty, holding down parish and diocesan jobs. If he leaves, who can come? He needs to stick it out. Or does he?

The parishioners will just have to make do. Sure, they have worshiped as a community in this building that they have maintained for years, decades for some, but it's not their property. They are mere stewards. They should be grateful to have a priest at all. Or should they?

Pity the bishop. He's got so many parishes to staff and only so many priests to staff them. He's spread thin and working at maximum capacity -- nobody doubts that. He has done the best he can with the resources at hand. Or has he?

Let's go back and look at the core issues: A vibrant, self-sustaining faith community needs a pastoral leader. Where can one be found? The parish also needs a sacramental minister. Do the two have to be the same? Think about it.

This is not really a staffing issue. We are witnessing the disintegration of the model of parish life that we have known for generations. The model has worked well; it has nourished generations of Catholics, but times are changing. The Catholics on Beaver Island -- whether they like it or not -- are pioneers in the 21st-century church.

The questions they face today are the questions all of us will face sooner or later. Think about that.

The leadership of St. Nicolas Parish in Evanston, Ill., **is asking these questions before the crisis comes.**

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