

Extend Your

CATHOLIC COMMUNITY



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EXTENDING CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

A REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF BUSINESSES IN THE LIFE OF THE PARISH

In a busy town, in the heart of America, there is a Catholic community that serves as the center of the social universe for a few thousand people. It is not enough for these Catholic pilgrims just to worship together on a Sunday. Instead, their identities are tied to their parish community seven days a week. This connection helps them to see the presence of Jesus Christ everywhere they go.

Three aspects of their parish experience influence their lives. First, they are present to their parish family during the week at the many activities held: multiple Bible studies, service organization meetings, social events, and even sporting events. The vibrancy of the parish provides many opportunities for interaction with each other.

Second, due to the frequency of activity with those in their parish family, many have met their best friends in that community. Their social time is often spent,

therefore, with those who believe as they do and share the same values as they do. Their parish family has, in essence, become their real family.

Finally, their wants and needs are often met by those in the community, or connected to the community in some way. Their doctors, dentists, plumbers, and contractors are all members of the same parish community. Many of the places they eat, the places they get their cars worked on, or the places they shop are owned by parishioners. Or they are supporters of the parish community by financial contributions or advertisements in the parish bulletin or newsletter.

All three aspects contribute to this experience of a vibrant parish community, where people feel they belong and their lives and personalities are shaped by the interactions with that community. And this parish is not a myth, because there are places like this springing up all across the country due to a renewal

of evangelization, a commitment to stewardship, and a desire for increased engagement. My parish of Saint Pius X in Greensboro, NC is one of them.

THE OVERLOOKED TOOL OF ENGAGEMENT

Most people can understand the first two aspects mentioned above. A parish with much activity not only draws more people into itself, but also increases the faith and commitment of those who become part of it. In turn, spending more time with people who share your faith and desire to belong leads to great relationships. If our faith is the most important thing in our lives—and it should be—then finding people who have that in common is crucial to maturing as a disciple of Jesus Christ. But oftentimes, the third aspect mentioned is overlooked, misunderstood, or even disregarded.

In the early part of the 20th century, much of the Catholic landscape in the U.S. was shaped by ethnic communities who lived in close proximity to each other. This was due partially to an anti-Catholic sentiment in a Protestant-dominated society. There was strength in numbers. In those communities, people not only found support to live a Catholic lifestyle that others might have found foreign, but they also found a support system that reached beyond Mass, the Catholic school, and the catechism classes that provided apologetic answers to tough questions. The support system featured bakers and restaurateurs, plumbers and electricians, retail store owners and service workers. As the decades went by, due in large part to the Catholic education system created in the U.S., the communities began to include Catholic professionals such as doctors, dentists, and lawyers. The interconnected web of businesses and patrons provided support for those Catholic communities not just in services, but also in creating its own micro-economy. Everyone got his or her baked goods, especially their first Communion and wedding cakes, from the same local bakery. In turn, that baker would support his parish in contributions, to both weekly collections and special projects. Some of these communities might even have been considered ethnic “ghettos” with a population living below a middle-class standard, but they survived because of the patronage of one another.

As time went by, and certainly after the Second Vatican Council, these communities began to diversify

and even break apart. Today, some communities still exist on a smaller scale, especially in the Northeast U.S. But most Catholics cannot conceive of this reality because they live at a time when lives are sectioned up into segments that have strong dividing lines. Oftentimes, work, play, family, and church are four separate realities. Unfortunately, this experience helps lead to a faith that does not permeate all of life. There seems to be no real sense of what a Catholic community could be, or why that would be important. However, in today's Catholic landscape, more parish communities are embracing principles of stewardship, working toward greater engagement on the part of parishioners, and are helping to create more mature disciples. In fact, when one experiences a truly vibrant parish and then is forced to move to a different locale, one searches for a similar experience, for one will accept nothing less.

This experience of community is enriched when the community celebrates the talents of those who belong to it. In fact, those who support the community but are outside the community of belief are often celebrated as well.

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Businesses are listed in parish directories, appear in bulletins and newsletters, and sponsor events like parish fairs and fundraisers. To look at these people and their businesses as simply advertisers totally misses the point. They are important parts of the new parish community that seeks to be more than just a building people visit on a Sunday. They are, in fact, extensions of the Sunday experience.

TALES FROM THE COMMUNITY

One day when I worked in parish ministry, a colleague of mine bought pizza for a youth ministry gathering. They had not been at the parish for very long, and they used a national chain that everyone would recognize. When the receipt was turned in, my pastor showed much concern. He wanted to know why the order had not been placed at two of the pizza parlors owned by parishioners. My colleague said she hadn't really thought of it. My pastor explained that the owners of the places he mentioned not only were parishioners, they supported the parish with ads in the bulletin and were also vendors at our yearly Fall Festival. He made it clear that the next receipt he saw for pizza needed to be from one of those two places. There began my colleague's education in the importance of the extended parish community.

These two pizza parlors were not just places that supported our parish. Due to encouragement from our pastor and the staff, they remain to this day gathering places for parishioners. Also, large numbers of parishioners go to doctors, dentists, and insurance

agents that belong to our parish. It is about more than patronizing those who can support the parish with gifts of treasure or buy ads in a bulletin. It is about a traditional view of taking care of one's own.

Of course, not every supporting business to a parish is owned or run by a parishioner. However, we must remember that every business that chooses to align itself with a Catholic community due to some form of financial or substantive support has done so willingly and without reservation. Not all faith communities are the same, and not all businesses are the same either. This reality became clear to me about 15 years ago when I was soliciting donations of food for our yearly Our Lady of Guadalupe party. Every year, we would approach Mexican restaurants in the area for donations of ethnic cuisine for our party. We began with our bulletin advertisers and any establishment that had supported us in some way in the past.

This year, I decided to visit a new eatery in town to ask for support. When I said where I was from, the manager told me the restaurant was owned by Christians, and since we were Catholic and not really Christians, they would rather not donate anything. That day, I learned that an advertisement in a bulletin or a donation of product to a parish event was more than just an exchange of goods or part of a marketing plan. It was about relationships. And I realized that if a business was going to choose to align itself with our community, we had a responsibility to support it just like it had supported us.



BOUND FOR HEAVEN, BUT LIVING IN THE WORLD

I have always appreciated being a Catholic because our worldview does not cut us off from the world. On the contrary, as good stewards we see all that has been given to us as a gift. The material world is not a fleeting reality filled with meaningless temporal things. We live in a world given to us by God, and we decide if things of this world will be used for good or not. We have the power to claim things and experiences for Christ.

The extension of our community into the workplaces of those who are with us or support us is more important than we sometimes realize. To show good faith in a relationship with a business can easily become an opportunity for evangelization. I have witnessed several conversions due to our pastor and parishioners frequenting an establishment. If you recall the two pizza places mentioned previously, one of them is owned by a family that for years never went to church. I remember how when their children were younger they would show up every

few years, seeking a letter for permission so one of their little ones could receive First Communion in Italy. It bothered me, but our pastor at the time would sign the letter anyway. When our current pastor arrived and we really turned our stewardship way of life into overdrive, we were encouraged at every turn to make this family feel a part of our family by patronizing them. We were encouraged not to see this relationship as just some temporal arrangement that would pass away. This family claimed to be in our parish and did support the community through the bulletin and donations of food to events. Regardless of Mass attendance at the time, we were connected through more than money and food. After some time, they began to be seen from time to time. Today, they never miss a Sunday and are active in the faith life of the parish. One member of the family has even been an RCIA sponsor! We must never be fooled into believing that what we see or experience has only a worldly dimension. All of life has a spiritual dimension, and by inviting God to be more present in our everyday experiences, the ordinary can become extraordinary.

PRACTICAL WAYS OF BUILDING UP THE EXTENDED PARISH COMMUNITY

Relationships and community do not just happen. They must be cultivated and grown. Here are a few easy ways to begin that process:

- Encourage parishioners to patronize supporters and parish businesses.
- Highlight parish supporters in your bulletin and newsletter.
- Encourage parishioners to share with businesses why they are patronizing them.
- Suggest to bulletin advertisers to use their bulletin ad as a chance to offer parishioners a discount.
- Take the time to thank your supporters at least once a year. Don't rely solely on your bulletin company to communicate their value to the parish. It is your relationship.
- Have a business fair, much like a stewardship ministry fair, after Mass so parishioners can meet business owners.
- Have daily Mass-goers consider continuing their experience of community at a supporting restaurant after Mass.
- Don't be afraid to offer feedback to the establishments on their service and quality of product. That feedback gives evidence of a relationship, not just another business transaction.
- Regularly pray for your supporters.

MORE THAN ON A SUNDAY

As the Church, we need to put behind us the days when being a Catholic simply meant a Sunday obligation. Contrary to some hymns, we are not really pilgrims just passing through. We are indeed sowers of seed, planting a good crop to be harvested by the God who entrusted this world to us. There should be no division between Sunday morning and Monday morning, between the Upper Room and the boardroom, or between our eucharistic table and our dinner table. We are Catholic and the world is our community.

Tracy Earl Welliver, MTS, serves as Director of Parish Community & Engagement at LPi and has worked with parishes all over North America, coaching them in the areas of stewardship, catechesis, and strengths for over 25 years. To bring Tracy to your parish, diocese, or conference, email him at twelliver@4lpi.com.