

StrengthsFinder IN THE CHURCH



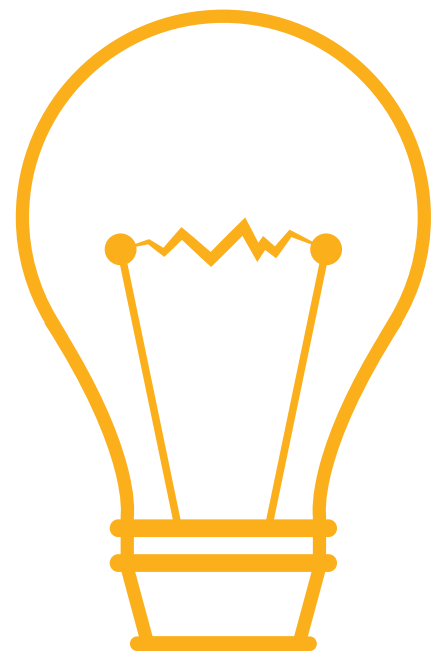
BECAUSE VIBRANT
CHURCHES MATTER



USING CLIFTON STRENGTHSFINDER IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

What would your initial reaction be if you were asked, “What really makes you special?” Over the past 10 years, I have asked this question to literally thousands of people, and the most common reaction is laughter. The laughter comes out, not because the question is funny, but because people see the question as somewhat absurd. Should you really look at yourself as special? Yes! Isn’t that egotistical or pompous? No! It is only if you think you are the only one who is special. The truth is that all human beings are special; yet, too many of us have no idea why. Some respond that what makes him or her special is being a child of God. That’s true. However, that’s what makes us all special and similar. How God has created you and me — and the set of gifts and talents He has given to each of us — is what makes us special and unique. As Christians, it is one thing to know that you are a part of the Body of Christ; it is another to realize which part you are called to be in that Body.

This question I have posed to so many usually comes about at a workshop on uncovering gifts and talents or, specifically, at a presentation or coaching event using Clifton StrengthsFinder. I became a certified Gallup strengths coach in 2009, and my experience has shown me that, in the Church, many people either do not see themselves as gifted or they do not have a good sense of the gifts given to them by God. As Church leaders, we have for too long asked people to give of themselves to their parishes and their global community without helping them discover what they have to give.



CATHOLICS HAVE A PROMINENT, PROFOUND ROLE TO PLAY

The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment was created after years of scientific research and testing, and it helps identify the presence of the 34 most commonly occurring talent themes in the human population. Some of those themes will be more prominent in one's natural makeup, and we call those dominant themes. The rest of the 34 themes are ranked in prominence, providing a glimpse at one's supporting and lesser themes. The assessment does not pigeonhole people as some critics have suggested, but instead provides insight as to how each person was created by God. We already understand our uniqueness by realizing that no two people look exactly alike unless they are identical twins, and even then, we know that twins have their own special traits. StrengthsFinder simply helps us see the reality on the inside of what we know on the outside.

If you were to search for your strengths twin — someone who had your top 5 talent themes in the same order — you would have a very difficult time of it. The odds are 1 in 33.4 million that you could find that person. People will often gasp at such a number when being told in a workshop or coaching session, but it really should not be surprising if you truly grasp the diversity and beauty of the human population. If you take this reality of the world population and apply it to the Catholic Church, the uniqueness of the individual Catholic is even more profound.

The latest Gallup numbers suggest that 22.5% of the U.S. population identify as Catholic. If you are an active parishioner in a U.S. parish, you know many people who call themselves Catholic but do not actively participate by attending Mass or playing a concrete role in a parish community. That means the percentage of the U.S. population that are active Catholics is lower. Take all of those and divide them between roughly 17,000 parishes. The uniqueness of each parishioner is indeed more prominent than being just 1 in 33.4 million.

The truth is that each active Catholic has a prominent and profound role to play in the success of their parish community. The trouble lies in the way we function as a parish, often just being satisfied with anybody truly stepping forward to do anything.

Think about what happens in parishes across the country near the end of the summer months. Announcements go out that more catechists are needed

for the new formation year. We explain that being a catechist is not that hard and training is available. As the first classes draw ever closer, we begin to emotionally strong-arm people into stepping forward. Catholic guilt and the honest desire to be part of a solution move people to take a chance and see if being a catechist is for them. Having spent 22 years as a catechist trainer in my home Diocese of Charlotte, North Carolina, provides me with enough evidence to know that not every person who bears the name of catechist has been called by God to be one. If only we spoke more about our parish ministries being for those called to those ministries. If only we helped parishioners discern that call by leading them on a journey where their God-given talents and gifts were uncovered and understood.

WHEN THE JOURNEY STOPS AT THE END OF THE PROGRAM

There are parishes that have taken seriously this challenge and have been using StrengthsFinder and other gift inventories to help their parishioners clearly see their talents and gifts. Living Your Strengths is a multi-week program that presents StrengthsFinder in a Christian context that has been used in many places. However, too often the journey stops at the end of the program. As a Church, we still lack enough trained and experienced coaches. One-on-one and group coaching is essential to truly unlocking the power of this journey of discovery. Too few pastors and priests have been coached so they can leverage their talents to become better shepherds and ministers. Even in parishes that can claim they have embraced this as an engagement tool, too few actual parishioners have taken part in the journey. The culture of our parishes has not changed, so this becomes simply another program among many programs.

This is not to suggest that StrengthsFinder itself is the answer to a disengaged community. In the end, it is only a tool. However, the answer does lie in a culture and viewpoint that we all have important parts to play in making our parishes clearer reflections of the kingdom of God. We must begin to send the message that, at times, Christ is calling us to a particular action because we have the necessary gifts needed. We cannot continue to believe that someone else will step up and do what is needed and that is good enough. As Church, we cannot continue to ask people to fulfill roles for which God did not create them. We suffer as the Body of Christ when feet become hands and eyes become ears. The answer lies in leading people to be, as Catholic writer and speaker Matthew Kelly often says, "The best version of themselves." A hand can learn to be a decent foot, but he or she will always be able to be a much better hand.

A simple anecdote I heard from a man in Brownsville, Texas, helps illustrate this. He had been asked to organize a closet in the parish hall that had become quite chaotic. He spent two days planning, sifting through the contents, installing shelving, and then placing everything into the space in an orderly fashion. When it was over, he lamented how hard it had been and that he installed shelves that were not quite level. Then it came to him that he knew someone who could have accomplished the entire task in not two days but instead two hours! He didn't want to walk away from the request of the pastor, but he could have assisted this other person in doing what they did best. The man telling this story had the realization after two days. Imagine how many people in the Church come to that realization after two years, 20 years, or never.

UNIQUELY CREATED AND GIFTED BY GOD

We all have our part to play. If we find it, then we can do great things. St. Peter was the first leader of the Church, but we do not read from the Gospel of Peter at Mass. St. Francis of Assisi started the Franciscans, but he himself never became a priest. St. Jerome was a learned priest who translated the Bible into Latin, but he didn't become a bishop like his contemporary St. Augustine. St. Thérèse of Lisieux's writings have had a profound influence on Christians throughout the world, yet she only lived to be 24 years of age. Each of these saints played a pivotal role in the history of the Church. If they had followed their own wills and not that of God, would we even know them today? By finding their place in the Body of Christ, they were able to maximize the gifts and talents given to them by their Creator. Certainly, God knows each of us better than we know ourselves. These saints didn't try to be someone they were not. They found their place in the Body of Christ, even if it was for a short time, as in the case of St. Thérèse.

When we find the purpose for which God created each of us and then place ourselves in the hands of God, amazing things can happen.

What does your parish do to help parishioners find their place in the Body of Christ? Do they see themselves as special? I asked that question for the first time nearly 10 years ago when addressing a group of Catholic school administrators and staff in the Archdiocese of Wellington, New Zealand. As I always do, I followed up by challenging everyone present to share with someone

next to them the answer to the question. An older gentleman stood up after the exercise to address the crowd. He explained that he had spent his entire life thinking he was not special and that was an important part of humility. He now realized it wasn't humility at all. In fact, he had lost the chance to see himself for all those years as special and uniquely created and gifted by God. With tears in his eyes, he said that reflecting on his giftedness gave more glory to God and made him humbler because of seeing what God had done in him.

Every single time I have asked the question, I have recalled that man and his words. Every single time I coach a person or group using StrengthsFinder, I think of him. His words echo the truth of too many people in our pews every Sunday. His words serve as a constant motivation for me as I strive to reach an unreachable goal where no one should ever have to feel that way again. If one cannot find in the Church the truth that they are fearfully and wonderfully made, where else can they go?

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