

## INTRODUCTION

**I**t was a typical parish council meeting at this particular parish. Members were focused on a multitude of projects for fundraising—their traditional mission for the season—and facilities repairs. Then one of the members spoke up, “What are we doing about the racial problems going on in our neighborhood?”

The atmosphere of the meeting changed abruptly. Tensions rose, and a flurry of responses ensued: “You can’t blame people for being upset. It changes our neighborhood.” “Some of those people are illegal immigrants and should be deported.” “I’m worried about the crime those people will bring and the loss of our property values!”

The chairperson, trying to regain control of the meeting, intervened: “Let’s get off of this topic and concentrate on how we are evangelizing!”

The chairperson was right to try to defuse tensions and get the group focusing on evangelization. Evangelization is the mission of every parish. But deeper questions remain. What exactly is the mission of evangelization, and can we evangelize well without addressing our collective approach to hot button issues like racism, poverty, homelessness, violence in society, and so much more? In today’s political and social climate, different ways of understanding and applying the social teachings of the Church can divide a parish community and make evangelization all but impossible.

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To capture the power and effectiveness of the mission of evangelization, we can look to the early church. In the Acts of the Apostles it says, “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers...And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42, 47).

How did the Christians, steeped in the gospel, the Eucharist, prayer, and common life, manage to attract others, even amid persecution? The early Christian theologian Tertullian wrote that the pagans looked at the Christians and said, “See how they love one another!”

Ah, the simple and profound truth, the heart of the gospel itself: love attracts. In the midst of today’s realities, loving one another in our parish is the beginning, but this must reach beyond our own parish if we are to be and to proclaim the good news. We are not isolated from the challenges to love: exclusiveness, prejudice, racism, sexism, oppression, self-absorption, xenophobia, violence, self-righteousness, to name a few.

Where are we to learn love? How can we grow in our abilities to love and to honestly confront our own obstacles to loving others—in our parish and beyond? The parish provides what the early church offered: teaching the gospel, celebrating the Eucharist, prayer, and a shared life within the complexities of our lives beyond the parish.

What do people—“outsiders”—say of our parish? Do you hear, “What a fine bingo game they have,” or “what a beautiful church,” or do they talk about a superb parish council or a large parking lot? Have you ever heard, “See how they love one another”?

The parish is where we are comforted by God’s love and where we are challenged to love one another. Sometimes, there are issues that directly affect our people and involve them in some sort of response. Parish leadership—the pastor, associate pastor/s, director of religious education, principal, youth minister, organization leaders, volunteers—are the ones to help us respond in faithfulness to our discipleship to Jesus.

This book is intended to be a resource to any parish leader or team that is responsible for forming others in faith and assisting them to live that faith in critical situations. The first two chapters are preparation for the leaders as they consider the parish and its ways of outreach with an eye to laying strong

foundations for social awareness and action.

The third chapter addresses specific issues around gospel living that affect our love of neighbor. This chapter touches on poverty, homelessness, immigration, and violence while answering the recurring question, “Who is my neighbor?” Each section of this chapter begins with a very brief reflection for the leader to be sure we are in touch with our own attitudes toward a given issue. The reflection is followed by suggested ways to approach a given issue or situation that affects the parish. There is, then, an applicable virtue highlighted as a way to respond to the issue. Each section concludes with a question/s for discussion and a brief prayer. The final chapter recalls us to faith and hope for our future and the courage to live all that we profess.

The societal issues that face us today are complex and have a plethora of causes, and some have painful histories. Yet we are called to “read the signs of the times” and to respond as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and members of the community of faith. Religion, despite some popular opinions, *is* supposed to influence our public actions, decisions, and attitudes. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* reminds us that, “For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (EN, 18). And Pope Paul VI writes that line just after he has stated that the Church “begins by being evangelized herself” (EN, 15). So our parishes, if we are to carry on Jesus’ mission of evangelization, must be constantly renewed, converted, and brought to the fresh hope that faith alone offers. Only then can we be instruments of the Good News in all strata of our personal and communal lives.

I’ve heard of a product called “Believe in God Breath Spray.” It promises instant belief in God and attendant virtuous action. While this may be tempting, we know lasting conversion is not instantaneous. Conversion of heart and mind and behaviors is, like any change, not easily accomplished. Whatever issue or situation we may face in our parishes, it may take concerted effort and some time. So, facing critical issues with our community and moving to a positive, gospel-based response will be a process. But it will be a process of both temporal and eternal value. So, in faith, let us begin!

# Attending to Our Faith Foundations

WHEN WE ADDRESS SPECIFIC ISSUES OF CONCERN, THERE IS A DANGER OF OUR SPEAKING OR WRITING BEING PERCEIVED AS “JUST HER/HIS OPINION.” Worse, it can be thought that we are embracing some particular political or ideological position. Our own prayerful reflection on the Scriptures and Tradition of Catholicism ground us and keep us honest in our efforts to lead and guide other disciples of Jesus.

Scripture calls us over and over to attend to our treatment of others, culminating in Jesus’ own words, “Amen, I say to you whatever you did for the least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). And, at his last supper he said, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes all point to love of God and neighbor. Church teachings—in documents and pronouncements and lived faith—all remind us that we respond to the salvation won by Jesus through love of God and neighbor. The Scripture of the good Samaritan told by Jesus in response to the question “Who is my neighbor?” is a clear reminder that we are all neighbors. Even those we perceive to be enemies are to be considered neighbors.

When you consider the issue you are facing, what Scripture comes to mind? What did Jesus say or do in a situation that is similar? Do a Scripture search using a keyword that names or is related to your issue.

The social teachings of the Church also apply to contemporary issues. “The Church, in fact, has something to say about specific human situations, individual and communal, national and international. She formulates a genuine doctrine for these situations, a corpus which enables her to analyze social realities, to make judgments about them and to indicate directions to be taken

for the just resolution of the problems involved” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 521). The social teachings are rooted in Scripture, particularly the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Catholic social teaching addresses human dignity and the sanctity of all life, the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, participation in the social order, and solidarity. Each of these principles has been explained and applied through various Church documents, and they have been explored by individuals and parishes in the search for the just response to current realities.

Saints, those who have lived the faith and done both simple and extraordinary deeds, provide another source for our reflection. While their issues may not be what we are facing, the principles on which they acted may well apply. Can you identify a saint who encountered a situation similar to what your parish faces?

Our sacramental celebrations call us to live what we have celebrated. Baptism celebrates our freedom from original sin and our incorporation into the body of Christ. It celebrates our God-given dignity and the holiness of community. Confirmation celebrates the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit we receive and bring into the world. The Eucharist—Body and Blood of Christ—celebrates our intimate union with Jesus and our union with one another. Penance, or reconciliation, celebrates God’s mercy, forgiveness, and healing, as does the anointing of the sick, which also continues to celebrate our dignity no matter our physical condition. Matrimony and holy orders celebrate the beauty of commitments made and the service to the community they promise. Which sacrament relates most clearly to your parish’s challenge? How are you calling your people to live the sacraments even as we celebrate them?

These foundations provide guidance for attending to the values of faith to impact any situations—personal or communal—if we prayerfully attend to them. They can become the basis for our parish response to issues if we have communally prayed about and attended to them. Doing this prayerful reflection together can firm up our unity in faith before we tackle subjects that may divide us.

These are resources our faith provides to help us live as Jesus’ disciples. Knowing and applying them is an ongoing process of conversion. It is the role of all parish leaders to provide—through formation processes, homilies, discussions, organizations’ meetings, missions, prayer experiences—the opportunity to engage these foundations in a meaningful and effective way.

# An Ounce of Prevention/ Preparation/Correction

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE FACE A CRITICAL SITUATION; THERE ARE TIMES WHEN AN ISSUE MAY BE ON THE HORIZON BUT IS NOT YET IMMINENT. These non-imminent times are perfect opportunities to assess your parish in light of those coming challenges.

Most parish leaders, unless they are very new in the place, have a general understanding of the people they serve. They know the gifts and talents, the strengths and weaknesses, the obstacles, and the seeds of the gospel present in themselves and their community members. They know, too, the weeds and their potential to choke the gospel seeds.

Write what you know about your parish and its people—beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Name the seeds of the gospel you want to nourish. Can you identify any weeds that require transformation?

What do you know about the neighborhood, the city, and the problems and needs of the area in the parish and beyond? How does your parish respond to these needs?

Some parishes have annual outreach projects, such as food and clothing drives, or Christmas gift projects. Some are assigned a “sharing parish” that has financial difficulties and is in a lower economic bracket. All of these are praiseworthy efforts to be sure, and the recipients have learned that they can count on a given parish at certain times. However, such “traditional” or publicized emergency projects can also truncate parishioners’ awareness of the needs around them and the people who are affected.

This can be countered by personalizing social outreach. As part of a food drive, families might write notes or prayers to place on their donations, for example. Raising awareness around the real people in need of nourishment is an important step. Other projects likewise can profit from some personalization.

How do we then go beyond prepackaged projects and develop greater awareness of the needs around us? What if we gathered interested parishioners to go in search of unserved or underserved needs? Then we could regather, consider our resources, pray, and together choose the need for which we felt best equipped to respond.

Parishes have discovered unique needs right in their own areas. One parish group found a home for retired religious brothers where very few of the brothers had any visitors. The parish began visiting. Then they discovered the brothers got only junk mail, if any. So the parish began sending the bulletin with a personal note each week. Another parish discovered a couple who, on their own, housed and supported an immigrant family as they went through the system toward legalization. The parish then donated household goods, foods, supplies, and clothes and helped with transportation to doctors, dentists, and immigration offices. When the coronavirus pandemic struck, many parishes kept in touch, especially with elderly and isolated people through video reflections and liturgies online.

It is, after all, relationships that convert us. Our own relationship with God and responsiveness to his graces turn our hearts. Our relationships with all people, but perhaps most of all those who are “not like us,” can open our hearts. Throwing a coat on a collection pile cannot do that.

Even bringing people together to discuss needs can help to assess “where we are” in our attitudes and behaviors. One parish, where there were many immigrants from years ago, decided to discuss what could be done to assist new immigrants coming to the area. Some of the participants commented “Why? No one helped us!” A painful attitude revealed!

What needs does your parish already serve? It is important to recognize those efforts and applaud them. What local need do you not yet serve? What and who are the resources your parish has that can enlighten you as to other needs? One parish had an orthopedic surgeon who spent three months each year in a third-world country to operate on children whose bones were malformed due to malnourishment. Another parish had a pediatrician who was medical director at a home for physically and mentally challenged children. She helped the parish become involved with the children there in many ways.

Which parishioners might suggest outreach possibilities through their

good works? Since relationships convert us, how might you make your current efforts more “personal”? Could parishioners help deliver the turkeys or Christmas presents? Might others bring the items collected for unwed expectant mothers to the places they are living?

We cannot help but be changed by our encounters with those in need. And our very encounters develop compassion in us and a new awareness of other needs. Look at the services you already have: What opportunities do they offer for building relationships?

Are you aware of any unchristian attitudes in your parish? Are there unspoken prejudices that are, nonetheless, apparent? Is there judgmental language used toward those who are “not like us”? Do we laud only those who keep our organizations running or do we honor those who are not very involved in the parish but are changing lives through works of justice? Parish heroes and heroines should not only be those who serve the parish but those who serve in the world beyond the parish to bring about gospel values.