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Peace in Our Parish

Every parish is a community. Over time parishes will change, depending upon their membership and their make-up. They grow. As they grow, they have many pieces that work together, in concert, and they can have, unfortunately, pieces that work apart.

Parishes, while joined by our common faith, have members that are diverse, in age, size, shape, employment, status, gender, and opinions. Each member's needs are different. These needs can also be quite static or quite kinetic. The dimension of time can change these member's needs and wants. Age impacts the parish over time. What one needs now, they may not need in the future.

Families look to parishes for schools and programs to educate their children in our faith. Families look to the parish for sacraments, for weddings, and funerals. Families look to the parish for support, interaction, friendships, community, faith, and grace.

Peace and harmony are desirable elements for any parish. How do both happen in each parish? Is respect of each person, program, and ministry felt by all? There are some strategies that each parish can follow that will heighten this respect and bring the peace that is necessary for a nurturing environment for all.

Traditions: these are very important. What are the annual events that your parish and school celebrate each year? Festivals, fish fries, rummage sale, dinner and auction, parade, service trips, and projects, exhibits, etc., all are events that children and families look forward to. They may take work, time, and organization, but they also build community and stability. They are constants that become, like our family traditions, expected and enjoyed. They are experiential. What can the members of the parish staff, and school do to instill support and contribution to these events? They should be embraced for, and of, themselves. Do we, as classroom teachers, participate in these events? Do we contribute and add to them or do we see them as burdens or events only to be tolerated?

Liturgical celebrations: these should have common elements and themes that families participate in each year. How does our parish celebrate the Easter Triduum? The Advent season? Do we host an annual Mission? How can we, as parish employees and members, enhance these liturgies? If we are active participants then we need to practice, interact, pray, and contribute to their success. Are there parish liturgical celebrations that our students can participate in and be active? There are many opportunities here for honor, service, respect, and tribute. My advice is never to let these events go by without involving the students in some fashion.

Shared Space: all of us are stewards. We are responsible for the upkeep and respect of our classrooms, library, gymnasium, worship spaces, dining room, halls, and other parts of the physical structures that make up our church, school, grounds, and parish. How do we welcome those who will use our classrooms (both the teacher and the catechists)? Is there some kind of proactive and health communication in place?

We are all members of the same parish. We need to embrace each and every member. Small notes of welcome, sharing of phone numbers or emails to keep in contact with those who use a shared space can do much to make the unknowns known. We need to seize these opportunities to be companions in our Christian ministry. Communal living is the essence of community. Nothing could be more communal than living and working in a parish community. Are we supportive of each other or do we let our own pettiness and struggles get in the way? There are many secular organizations that have worked hard to bring the mutual aspect of communal working to the business collective. Should these organizations be besting us in their productivity because they have learned to embrace their differences and work as a team? There can be no greater mission than working on sharing our faith and devoting ourselves to the Roman Catholic Church.

Security of Self: probably the greatest contributor to peace is the feeling and sense of security that we have in ourselves. Next, our support structures (family and friends) should be strong and able for each of us. After that, the stability and comfort that comes within our daily environment is essential for us to be secure. Peace in the parish happens when we embrace the challenges, sacrifices, struggles, joys, and unique experiences we face each day in our respective vocations. Teachers are seen as beacons of knowledge and faith. They need to live their faith and find comfort in it. They need to be active members of their parish communities as well as the one that employs them (if it is not the parish they are registered in).

Probably the greatest single variable that limits the ability for peace to be felt, and transmitted, in our parishes, is attitude. There are some wonderful works of art by M.C. Escher (1898-1972) where the viewer can witness, through a graphic image, an illustration that reverses ground. Escher could take something dark and something light and, over the course of a page, transform the images so they reverse: the dark becomes light and the light becomes dark. He enables his viewers to change their perspective merely by looking. If you have ever looked at some form of optical illusion drawing, short lines look long and long lines look short; the result is the same. You have changed your perspective. Many times parish employees and members need to do everything in their power (not just sight like Escher does, but in all senses) to change perspectives: to travel and respect those who work along side us every day. Are there moments built in our calendars to foster social get-togethers, to cultivate the parish ministries, and to embrace each other's uniqueness and gifts? We should not be strangers to each other.

Peace in our parish is not the pieces of our parish. It is the unity that needs to be espoused, lived, modeled, and shared. Once we and our co-workers find our inner peace and security, we can contribute to peace within our community, city, state and country. All we have to do is to be present like Christ. Our strength and ability to be there for our families and parishioners as true teachers and educators, is at the core of our teaching vocation.

We do not do our jobs in isolation. We do them together; in calm assurance, in obvious unity, in evident accord and, finally, in lived PEACE!

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