

A Community of Strangers?

The Catholic Hospitality Training Institute

Social and community life in the 21st century have become more fractured (or even non-existent) than at any other time in human history. Where once households were multigenerational and included extended family, homes today are highly individual and private, and may not even contain a complete nuclear family. Where once families tended to stay in the general vicinity in which they grew up, today more than ever adult children live in a different state than their parents, far from extended family. Where once American immigrants often huddled together in faith communities, forming 'The German Parish', 'The Italian Parish', and where the parish served as the social hub for everyday life, today many young people don't even think to officially register at one particular parish. Members of a parish don't live strictly within the geographical boundaries anymore – and some will even hop from local church to local church for Sunday Mass.

We don't necessarily experience the connectedness of community at our parish even if we have been there for years as officially registered members. It's possible to attend the same Mass for months or years, recognize similar faces that are often at the same liturgy you attend, without even learning their names. Although the quietness in church before Mass begins may stem from a pious intention of preserving reverence in church, but it can backfire if Mass attendance is our sole involvement in the parish. If families are fortunate enough to know each other in the parish, it is often primarily because of the parochial school attached to our church, or because we have been aggressive in forming those relationships. Rare is the Catholic parish with a vibrant culture of closeness among its members.

A recent opinion piece at cnn.com entitled "Ready for the Marriage Apocalypse?" detailed that today's young adults are increasingly unconcerned about ever getting married and can envision a future where they remain happily single, citing a Pew Research Report surveying public attitudes about marriage¹. This affects our parishes if we have an underdeveloped ministry toward single adults. Many Catholic parishes still measure their membership in "families", when the phrase may not accurately describe the makeup of your parish membership. Without a life centered on a marriage or family life, and with many young professionals living in a different city or state than their family of origin, single adult social life centers around friendships with other single adults. Catholic parishes want to promote the dignity of marriage and family life, and rightly so – but we must balance this with evangelization and ministry geared toward unmarried persons.

Church culture, especially for Catholics, can never promote 'Lone Ranger Christianity', where our experience of living as Christians is only a private relationship between us and Jesus. Without detracting from the importance of a personal relationship between the individual and the Lord, we must also break down the barriers that make relationship more difficult. Sometimes Catholic culture seems to be averse toward emphasizing the importance of human relationships, as though it could somehow be opposed to our need for God.

¹ www.cnn.com/2015/04/07/opinion/costello-marriage-millennials/index.html

One suggestion to consider is the process we have in place for integrating **new parishioners**. It is not an uncommon experience for a new family to attempt to register at a new parish – and the sum total of the experience is 1) filling out a ridiculously long, complicated form, and 2) being given their offertory envelopes. What message does this send? It may be *'You are an outsider and it won't be easy for you to belong here... oh, and we want your money'*. What if, instead, we could simplify the registration process? What if every new family was given a tour of the parish offices and introduced to the parish staff? It doesn't help new parishioners to read 'see Susie about joining the youth group' in the bulletin when they have no idea who Susie is. What if families in the parish with some common ground to the new member (empty-nester, young single, families with young children, etc.) invited them over for dinner and provided a bridge to the wider parish community by taking the time to introduce them to others?

Another way in which American society is less communal than ever is that we don't know our neighbors. Where in centuries past, households were composed of multigenerational families or several individuals all working to support a 'Great House', today the home is a private, insular escape from the world and stressful demands of one's job. We can come home from our work (which is less likely to be a strict 9-5 than in the past), and may not even see the people who live in the home next to us – or we avoid eye contact and rush to get inside because we're exhausted from work and don't want to interact with another human! The parish can be counter-cultural by encouraging regular neighborhood gatherings, like Fr. Chas Conoy's 'Fireside Chats', detailed in *Forming a Parish of Intentional Disciples*.

Every human person is made in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God. Our God is a community of persons, is relationship – and so the ache for relationship is written on the heart of every person who comes through the door of our churches. Even if it seems that one individual or another doesn't like interacting with other people it is almost always the result of emotional wounds they carry. To ensure that our efforts to become a more hospitable parish are as fruitful as possible, we cannot neglect considerations inoculating our church culture against the 'stranger danger' culture that leaves the rest of modern society so fractured and socially isolated.