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Our Church: More than a Parking Lot

Last weekend I asked pastors to share with parishioners my letter providing an update on recent developments in our Renew My Church process. As I wrote, what is at stake as we begin this effort is whether or not we will take seriously the task of passing on the faith to the next generation. For some of us, the question is quite personal. As a couple recently put it to me: “We wonder if we are going to be the last generation of Catholics in our family.”

All who attend Mass recognize that, as we look around the community, we are missing a good number of the children of those in attendance, young men and women who have been educated in our schools and religious-education programs, and who are now starting families of their own.

This forces us to take a hard look at the many challenges facing us today. What do we need to do in order to make our parishes vibrant and sustainable communities for our people today and for generations to come? Concretely, this means that we must use our limited human and material resources prudently. But it also means adopting a missionary mindset that allows us to reach out to and welcome both the un-churched and the de-churched.

We should not be afraid of this task; indeed, it presents us with an opportunity for new fruitfulness. We stand on the shoulders of ancestors, many of whom were immigrants in the not-too-distant past, who rolled up their sleeves and got to work on the challenge of forming communities, men and women who built the churches and schools, the hospitals and many agencies that have served countless people across generations. So much has been handed on to us by those who have gone before us, but the most valuable part of that legacy is their deep faith, which allowed them to respond to Christ’s call to continue his mission of making disciples. Renew My Church must begin there, with a faith that Christ is calling us to take up in a fresh way his mission, rather than settling for the way things are. It is a call to move from maintenance to mission.

Pope Francis offered some inspiration in one of his recent homilies when he used the image of a parking lot to describe how some, whom he calls “lazy Christians,” consider their parish church. This is what he said: “Lazy Christians are ‘parked’ Christians: they have found in the church a good place to park.... For them the church is a parking lot that protects their life, and they go forward with all the insurance possible. But these stationary Christians, they make me think of something the grandparents told us as children: beware of still water, that which doesn’t flow, it is the first to go bad” (Pope Francis, Jan. 17, 2017, daily Mass).

The message for us is clear. Staying put in our comfort zone is not tenable. Given the challenges that face us, we need our parishes to become ever more vital, to use our limited resources ever more fruitfully and not to allow ourselves to become lazy Christians.

I encourage everyone to pray for and to become involved in the Renew My Church process. As I wrote in my Jan. 22 letter, we have now identified the parish groupings... A grouping is a set of parishes and schools that will together undertake a facilitated planning process as part of Renew My Church.

All parishes across the archdiocese are part of a grouping. Within each grouping and in successive waves over the next three years, parishes will come together to gather information and evaluate options for the pastoral needs of all in the grouping. What does your parish do well that another parish in your grouping could learn from? How might your parish benefit from the wisdom and resources of a neighboring community?

By listening to one another and working together, we will build a renewed, vital and sustainable Catholic presence for the good of our communities. I ask that each of you search your hearts and ask yourself if you are willing to accept the status quo, to accept the possibility that you may be the last Catholic in your family. If you are not willing to accept that, then I invite you to join me as we embrace this opportunity to listen and respond as Christ calls to us in our time: Renew My Church.