

Parish Priests Are the Cure to the Crisis: Part 2 Leading Out of the Crisis

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In part 1 of this series, we discussed how the typical Catholic thinks about happiness, religion and freedom, and how these disordered views prevent them from becoming true friends of Christ. In this article, we look at how parish priests can change these ways of thinking by developing authentically Catholic culture and leading their parishes out of the crisis.

To change the thinking of Catholics, we will need to change the culture of the parish, and to do this, we need to understand what makes up culture. Culture is made up of three elements: what we think (mentality), what we do (habits), and what we're surrounded by (environment). These elements directly relate to the transcendentals of truth, goodness and beauty. The more a parish's mentality is based in truth, their habits in goodness and their environment in beauty, the closer it is to God and the more authentically Catholic the culture.

Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. (Rom 10:17) The first step to shifting the mentality of a parish is to preach Christ and the faith with boldness and confidence. Any sense of compromise and the priest's authority, along with the authority of the Church, is diminished. It must be clear to parishioners that what the priest teaches are truths handed down from God through His Church, not just one belief among many. Preaching in this way fights against relativism and the false idea of freedom, that one can do as they please, creating their own truth and morals.

With the poor level of catechesis over the last half century, parishioners are ignorant about many elements of the faith. Through prayer and knowledge of the parish, priests should determine which truths to preach about. In many parishes, parishioners have lost interest, so one might consider beginning with elements that will inspire them and pique their interest, drawing them further in and building a level of trust between the priest and the people. While sermons are the most obvious place for this to occur, many priests use podcasts, Facebook Live, bulletin inserts and regular parish talks to connect with parishioners and deepen their knowledge of the faith.

Preaching isn't the only way to change a parish's mentality. According to Aristotle, *we learn moral virtue primarily through habit and practice rather than through reasoning and instruction.* Habits, the second element that makes up the culture, is also a primary tool for changing the mentality. A habit as simple as the Morning Offering combats the idea that religion is something to make life better, a self-help tool. By offering themselves and their day to God each morning, they connect themselves to the priest's offering at Mass. This begins to change the way they look at the faith. Their faith begins to become an offering to God.

The Morning Offering is just one of many habits to instill in parishioners. But how? Parishes are diverse, and the priest can't reach everyone. Who should the priest focus his time and efforts on? According to St. John Paul II: *the future of the world and of the Church passes through the family.* The priest should focus his efforts on families, but even this is difficult. In today's world, getting whole families together and then having material that works for children, mothers and fathers is nearly impossible.

So, how do priests most effectively reach families? Through fathers. God placed fathers as the head of the family, and we must return to His eternal wisdom and restore fathers as leaders of the faith in the family. Priests must pour themselves into the fathers of their parish, forming them in the faith, building up Catholic habits, and equipping them to lead their families in the Catholic faith. Through these men and their families, the priest can build an authentic Catholic community and culture within the parish. As the interior lives of these families grow, the graces and fervor will overflow into works of charity, helping to evangelize and minister to the rest of the parish.

This newly formed community also gives priests a place to send converts, new parishioners or those interested in learning and growing in the faith. These are the families that should be mentoring couples to be married and running your baptismal prep. This puts them in natural situations to evangelize and invite others into authentic Catholicism and community.

Beauty moves, draws, convinces the observer or the listener that it is valuable, true, good. Its deep mystery from within evokes wonder through its visible form. (Fr. Thomas Dubay) The church and the Mass should be the most beautiful experience of the week for parishioners. The priest should beautify the church as best he can, filling the Mass with incense, bells, quiet reverence, sacred music, etc. Spare no effort to create beauty and awe, showing the importance of the event and the One being worshipped.

When one looks around the parish, they should find Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the sacraments. There should be an abundance of opportunities for Confession. The Blessed Sacrament should be exposed with regularity, and beautiful Holy Hours to help draw in and elevate parishioners to prayer. Special feast days should be celebrated with a beautiful Mass and community celebration afterward. These experiences will build an environment where parishioners find their happiness in God rather than the things of the world.

Like most things in the Church today, the life of the diocesan priest needs a restoration. Many Diocesan priests are busy, too busy. They may have become too much of an office worker or may have been asked to run multiple parishes. The secular needs of a parish have grown since the days of St John Vianney. For a priest to lead his parish out of the crisis, he will need to give himself *continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.* (Acts 6:4) The apostles appointed deacons to allow them to do so. Priests today should look to appoint trusted laymen to run the office and religious education, allowing themselves to prioritize their days with the sacraments, prayer and true priestly ministry.

Changing the culture and leading a parish out of the crisis will take much prayer, penance and work. At times, it may even seem like an impossible dream, but that's not the case; for *with God nothing will be impossible.* In our next and final article of the series, we will discuss *the impossible dream* of what a parish ought to be and look like.