

## *The Basics of Parish, Ministry and Lent*

*By Nancy Volks, D.Min.*

We had a discussion at the Pastoral Council meeting this past month on the purpose of the Parish, the role of parishioners and the need for Evangelization in our modern and often confused world. Many were really wondering how are we growing and changing as a parish community? We began our 2014 Lenten Season praying for parish renewal; the reality is that some would like to know what are we renewing? With so many very basic questions needing to be addressed the Council suggested that I write a few reflection papers on topics that will help parishioners process what the church is asking of all of us.

Every Catholic Parish in the Albany Diocese is different, but we all have, [or should have], the same mission. *To go out into the world and make disciples for Jesus the Christ*; that in a nutshell is our mission and that in a nutshell is **Evangelization!** Our job is to tell people of *our experience* of Jesus and *His saving act* in the world for all humanity. It sounds simple enough but, if we do not have a relationship with Jesus (**through prayer and community**) and if we have not reflected on His saving power in humanity and in particular, our own life, than we have no story to tell. We all have a story; it's taking the time to discern and give witness to the Love of Christ and the power of God that's the hard part. Quiet reflection and meditation will bring our witness (our story) to the foreground.

Once we give **witness** and individuals begin to hear the Word of God through us, our role is to invite people to **our parish** to join us on a Spiritual Journey to the Kingdom of God. I know that other Faiths have different ways to entice people to show up at services. Here at St. Clare's we do it simply by conversation and invitation, which is the heart of our **Ministry**.

**Ministry** is focusing our talents within the parish community so that we move as one body, the Body of Christ in the world. There are no "*Lone Rangers*" in Catholic Christianity. We work together, all sharing our God-given talent for the benefit of the community. **Discernment** of our talent is the place to start and should be an ongoing process in our prayer life. We will recognize it through the feedback from people, who say, "Oh, you do that so well" or "you really have a knack for that." It's not flattery. It is simply a statement of fact that one has ability in that area. A Catholic, [no matter what age] without a ministry is a contradiction. Meditate on that sentence for a minute or two. ***A Catholic without a ministry is a contradiction.*** Repeat it in prayer, so that it sinks into our spiritual awareness. **Ministry is not an option for a true disciple.** If you want to follow Jesus you have to work. The good Lord has given us all talents to be used for the benefit of all and to bring glory to the Father. Even if you are homebound, your ministry can be to pray for the success of the parish, for the sick, for all those who have died; the list goes on and on. If you are healthy and out in the world there is work to be done!

The Parish is not a building. It is all of us, in a collective area, that make a **commitment** to work together and share in the **responsibility of our spiritual journey and renewal**. We do this through evangelization and ministry. The Catholic Community of St. Clare is the Body of Christ working in the world, on Central Avenue in Colonie, New York within the frame work and the guidance of the **Albany Diocese** and its **Bishop**.

It is our responsibility to come together to worship as the Catholic Church teaches. Therefore, we create a building that enhances the worship environment. We have music, [not to entertain] to provide an avenue for and to enrich **our participation**. We have a **priest** who presides at Mass and changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus. All are necessary to make worship meaningful for the parishioners. It is here, at Mass, in which we are nourished and enriched so we can go out into the world and be active in the coming week for Christ. It is this place where we invite people to come and see how we love one another and how faith is shared and grown. Are we perfect at it? No, but we keep striving to get better.

The building also “houses” our Ministries. The ministries meet here to discuss service ideas and planning events that will enliven the faithful. These include but not limited to: Prayer & Worship, Faith Formation, Pastoral Care, Nursing, Social Activities, Social Concerns, Sacrificial Sharing of our resources, Liturgical Ministries, Finances and Pastoral Council. **All working together** to nourish parishioners who are the disciples working in the world... **evangelizing!**

All the ministries are important because they equip us to do the will of God and help us to grow deeper in love with God and each other.

### ***So how does Lent fit into all of this?***

As all Catholic parishes do, we follow the Liturgical Year. It's a circle and is repeated each year in a three year cycle A, B, C. The year starts with Advent and ends in Ordinary Time. We are in year A. Lent is the period of time (40 days) in which we focus our thoughts on the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. It's a time of fasting, Almsgiving and prayer. **My own personal opinion** is that some people want to make these 40 days dire and drab. I think that prayer (everyday), fasting and almsgiving have their place but, for me, the doom and gloom is just not possible if Jesus is walking on the journey with you; which I believe He is. He has already risen!! We should act like it!

Lent, as all liturgical time, is a joy-filled time. That said, we are required to enter into the seriousness needed to **renew and own our discipleship**. Through the lens of ministry, we know fully that being a follower of Jesus in today's world is not an easy task.

The seriousness of Jesus' Death and the joy of his Resurrection calls each of us to examine our thoughts, and examine our actions. Ask yourself: Am I living in a right manner? Am I living the Gospel? Do I have a Ministry? Am I living my life in a sacred manner? Lent is a good time to take stock in how we are really doing as a follower/ worker in the kingdom. It's a good time for the parish to ask, how we are doing as ...

**“a community united in Jesus Christ who is alive in our midst....By the way we live, we inspire and motivate all people, to be what we say we believe.” [from our mission statement].**

Who have we **inspired** and **motivated** this year to seek Jesus?

If we are people who attend Mass and then go home, doing nothing to improve the community of St. Clare's through discipleship by using our gifts, we are missing the point of being a follower of Jesus.

If we are people who worship and contribute only when asked to do so, not really motivated by love for others, than we are doing a nice gesture and we are missing the point of being a follower of Jesus.

Being a follower of the **Risen Christ** means worship and service through Love. I hope these basic thoughts have helped. Lent is a perfect time for all of us to enter the **Mission of Jesus** and see our role, our place in the Body of Christ. Come tell us what **you have to offer this parish...**