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THE THIRD MOMENT OF A SACRAMENT



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THE THIRD MOMENT OF A SACRAMENT

One of the great challenges to pastoral ministers are young parents. Presented here is a strategy for an outreach to parents who recently have had their child baptized. The general strategy could effectively be applied to the sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist, Confirmation, and Marriage, but for ease of describing it, we will focus here on the Sacrament of Baptism.

Very often this comment has been heard: “Once the baptism is over, we do not see many of these parents again until their child is ready for school or religious education.”

There are three moments to the Sacrament of Baptism: the preparation program, the celebration of the sacrament itself, and the follow-up. We tend to spend time and energy on the first two moments, but do not give attention to the third. Yet this third moment is a wonderful opportunity to minister to the parents of the newly baptized at an incredibly significant time in their lives — and to stay connected to them.

Presented here is a pastoral plan that can be used by a parish to stay connected with these young adult parents during the five years after their child's baptism... the third moment of Baptism. It is a plan that can prevent the frustration of losing contact with these parents and children until the children are enrolled in the school or parish religious education program.

It is common for parish staff members to measure the relationship of their people's presence and activity at parish events. As mentioned above, concerning baptism ministers have commented, “Once the child is baptized, we don't see many of these parents again until their children are ready for school or religious education.” Conversely, our parishioners also measure their relationship to the parish in terms of their participation. Some might say, “I don't go to Mass very often.” Others say things like, “I have been an usher at the 8:30 Mass for twenty-six years.”

This pastoral plan, “The Third Moment of a Sacrament,” uses an opposite approach. It emphasizes the parish's relationship to the young parents. In other words, *instead of assessing how well young parents stay in touch with the parish, this pastoral plan asks another question: “How well will the parish stay in touch with these young parents?”*

HERE IS HOW IT WORKS.

The goal: To develop and maintain a connection between the parish and the family of the newly baptized by personally contacting (by telephone) the parents four times a year for the next five years.

MAKING IT HAPPEN:

1. Create a list of 5-15 young parents who you can invite to call the parents of the newly baptized children. They should be parents whose children are enrolled in the parish school or religious education program. The number of callers needed will be determined by the number of baptisms celebrated.
2. As personally as possible, ask for their willingness to call one or two of the parents of the newly baptized children four times a year for the next five years. Nothing more than a phone call is required — no meetings or activities to attend, and no groups to join. You are asking for just a simple phone call, which they can make from home, and will take only a few minutes.

THE PHONE CONVERSATION — WHAT NOT TO SAY AND WHAT TO SAY:

1. First, it is very important to clarify what they would NOT say to these young parents. The callers should NOT ask if the parents are going to Mass regularly. Also, they should NOT ask if the parents are financially supporting the parish. The goal of this outreach is to establish contact with these young parents and create a connection between them and the parish. This must be done in the least threatening way.
2. Here is a suggestion for what they might say: “Hello. I am Tony Garza, a parishioner at St. Mary's Parish. I understand your daughter Kristen was baptized there on June 10th. On behalf of the parish, I want to congratulate you on her birth and baptism. After each of our baptisms, we like to call parents periodically, just to see how you and your family are doing. It's really a social call, pure and simple, from our parish to you. If there is something we can do for you, you can let me know. I have two younger kids myself... I'd like to call back a few times a year, if that's OK with you.”

WHY FOUR TIMES A YEAR?

Trust takes time to build. Consistency lets people know this is a serious effort. Repetition is proof that you are truly interested in them. You are not spying on them for the parish, telling them to go to Mass or participating in other stereotypes that people might have about a phone call from a Catholic parish. You are simply offering your support and letting them know the parish cares.

WHY FIVE YEARS?

It is much more than the time period between the baptism of a child and entry into a religious education program or the school. It is more than a series of phone calls. This pastoral outreach is about building relationships. Through a parish representative's consistent phone calls, a relationship is being established between the caller, the parish, and the young parents. A bond is being formed. That takes time. This is about entering into communion with these people. It has the potential of leading them to share in Holy Communion at weekend Mass, if they do not already do so.

Twenty phone calls over a five-year period will, most likely, begin as an uncomfortable experience for the caller and for the young adult parents. This is so "not Catholic." But what will surely begin as awkward small-talk has the possibility of leading to some good conversation around key questions on life, faith, work, marriage and children. The joys and struggles of raising children in a Catholic home might be shared.

After a few years, it will become clear whether or not these young adult parents are going to church. There is no need to ask them. In all likelihood, they will share that with the parish representative. But first they will need to be certain that the caller will not judge or chastise them. Rather, the representative will be there to offer support and encouragement.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YEAR FIVE?

First of all, there is no guarantee that anything will happen, except that the phone calls will end. What happens next is the responsibility of the young parents. But there is a greater degree of probability that these young adult parents will feel welcome in the parish. Through simple phone conversations with the same people, they have been experiencing a caring parish. If they have not been churchgoers, reasons to attend are now more real. If they have had serious questions about the Catholic faith, there is a good chance that some of their questions already have been addressed. Plus, there is the possibility that they will become a parish representative to an even younger couple who recently celebrated the baptism of their child.

THE ROLE OF THE CALLER:

The person or couple representing the parish has a number of responsibilities. Most importantly, they represent the Catholic Church and not just the parish. This might be their first encounter with other parishioners, and their first invitation into a relationship with their Church as adults. Whether they are loosely or loyally affiliated with the parish, they will remember that members of their Church cared enough to call.

The caller must engage the young couple in conversation. This is why it is important that each caller be close to these parents in age. Most likely, the caller will lead the conversation. So, they need to be good conversationalists, able to keep it light and easy, rather than probing and inquisitive. The caller will need to be prepared for short answers at first, rather than engaging dialog. "How is your child?" "Fine." "And how are her parents?" "Ok." "Is it ok if we call you a few times a year, just to check in?" "Sure." Don't be concerned; it is going to take time for trust to develop. For the most part, your calls will be appreciated, even if that appreciation is not voiced.

As time goes by, the caller will need to be a good listener and a good note taker. As conversation becomes easier with time, they should listen for comments and issues about marriage, family life, religion, and raising a child. It is extremely important to listen carefully to what is said. If direct questions are asked, and the caller needs to check into some possible resources or answers, they should simply ask if they can contact the parish and call the parent back. "Let me check into that and get back to you..." is more helpful than giving a wrong answer.

The callers could easily come to know more about these families than the parish staff does. After several phone calls, they might learn some of these families' needs and wants. Any information that could be beneficial to the parish, or enable the parish to assist the families further should be shared as soon as possible with a staff member. Wouldn't it be great to hear and be able to deliver upon some of those requests? It is very possible that the results of these conversations could affect or change the course of parish life.

The callers should report at least annually on their conversations to the pastor, the director of religious education, and the parish staff. The reporting could be as simple as making several bullet point lists:

1. what I heard was...
2. expressed needs include... and
3. suggestions are...

These reports of conversations will reflect the expressed needs, concerns, and questions of a younger part of the parish that normally do not get heard or expressed. It is possible that some of the expressed needs will include information on teaching your child to pray, effective parenting skills, what it means to be Catholic, day care, raising your child Catholic, deciding to enroll the child in a Catholic school, options for tuition support, adult faith formation, marriage support, validating marriages in the Church, concerns about annulments, etc. It might also turn into a wonderful mentoring program, as experienced parents share their wisdom with first time parents. The possibilities are endless!

WHAT IS TO BE GAINED?

- The parents will gain a relationship with a parishioner who they trust and can contact with questions and for support.
- The parents will know that their Church cares about them and their children.
- The parents will have at least one point of contact with their Church.
- The Church will have this point of contact with these parents.
- Information gathered through these calls can greatly assist a future ministry to these young parents — possibly even created and run by those callers.
- The callers can put their wisdom and experience at being parents and parishioners to work.
- The callers will be making a significant contribution to their parish with a relatively small amount of work.
- The parish will be in greater contact with these young adult parents, with minimal involvement of parish staff members.
- There quite possibly will be an increased presence at Sunday Mass through the program.
- Evangelization will be taking place; a greater connection to Christ is likely to occur.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN:

If you can observe the Third Moment of the Sacrament of Baptism working positively in your parish, consider developing such a Third Moment outreach strategy for the sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist, Confirmation, and Marriage.

If we can brainstorm with you or if there is any other way we can assist you, please let us know.

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