

## *Decide to be in Community* from *Fill All Things*

The parish will be a healthier place if members can own that they have decided to be in community and that they have decided to be in *this particular* parish community. Benedict's position about grumbling is in chapter five where he reminds members that they have chosen to live in community. The Rule seems to assume that some things come along with a person's decision to join, things like no grumbling, balance, worship, silence, and humility. In deciding to join a community we also decide to live within the particular ways of that community. How do we help people accept responsibility for the decision they have made?

Be explicit with potential members of the parish that to join is to decide to be part of a living community, to open oneself to the process of being influenced and shaped by others, and to participate in the mystery by which you will influence and shape others. It is to enter into the rhythms of the community's life that will, in time, work their way into your mind and heart. We lose life to gain life, die to rise, become empty so we might be filled. The central mystery of Christian life is lived in the context of community, community with others and with God.

The Rule's assumption is that the community is the setting within which conversion takes place. That conversion is shaped by the give and take of life together; in the example of others; by giving oneself to habits of listening, balance and humility; and by the occasional confrontations and upheavals that life with others always brings. That conversion is a gradual process; that holiness comes bit by bit, and it is best when not noticed. Parishes need to tell new members about how it works. New members often need a picture of what is possible in a parish and guidance in how to engage those possibilities.

The Rule's approach toward new members may seem strange, even wrong, to parish leaders who have been encouraged to go all out in bringing people to Christ and the Church. Benedict writes, "Do not grant newcomers to the life an easy entry..." (Chapter 58) The process of admission includes: knocking at the door for four or five days to test patience and desire, a few days in the guest house, then time with those in training. The Rule is read to the person after two, six and ten months. The person reflects on the Rule (you need to think about what you are getting yourself into). Only after all this comes the commitment of the person and the community.

What the Rule is getting at is the need to, "Test the spirits to see if they are from God" (1 John 4:1 and the Rule, Chapter 58). The community has an interest in maintaining its capacity to be a place of formation. That means it can't constantly be struggling with new members over the central culture of the community. There needs to be an adequate degree of stability.

The potential new member needs to be a wise steward of her or his time and energy. Is this a place (a climate, a culture, a people) in which the person's spirituality will grow and mature? Or should another community be considered that would be more of a fit with the person's needs?

For example, the Order of the Ascension is a Benedictine community of Christians in the Episcopal tradition that I've been part of for over 25 years. Its members take a three-year Promise "to seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things and circumstances of my

life through stability, obedience and conversion of life.” The Order has a shared commitment to parish revitalization and the struggle for justice. Its members gather yearly for five days of retreat, education and social time. All its members have received a significant amount of training in congregational development.

In its Rule, the Order lays out a process of entry that includes: a five month discernment period of reflection on the Rule, developing an understanding of the relationship between the Promise and the person’s daily life, and a series of questions for both the applicant and the community, including the following:

- Is there obvious common ground between the person’s and the Order’s orientation to parish life and the spiritual life?
- Does the person have an adequately disciplined spiritual life, and sufficient self-esteem and support from colleagues, family and friends, so as to be able to benefit from what the Order does offer in vocational support without holding to unreasonable expectations of the support such a life will provide?
- Is membership in the Order likely to have beneficial effects on the person’s work, family, friendships?
- What does the person bring to the Order?
- To what extent is the person making an act of free commitment, choosing to devote energy in this way and pattern? To what extent is the commitment “clouded” and “divided”?

A parish church is not a monastic community. It may be a dispersed community in the same way as the Order of the Ascension, but it doesn’t have the same purposes and therefore doesn’t require that level of training and commitment for membership. However, parish leaders do need to explore the same underlying and interdependent issues, such as:

- The parish is an instrument of God’s mission of Holy Unity and people becoming fully alive. The parish’s purposes emerge out of God’s purposes. The life that glorifies God and forms women and men in the divine image is shaped in the rhythm of what I’ve called the Renewal-Apostolate Cycle.
- Given the purpose and task of a parish community, what is needed from new members so they are in relationship to the community in a manner that advances the community’s purpose, as well as the person’s growth?
- What does the community need to communicate to potential members so they can make an informed decision about membership? What does the community need to ask of the potential member? What training and education needs to be provided to incorporate the person into the way this community lives its life and forms people in the Christian life?

Dealing openly with these issues may help a parish create an entry and incorporation process that has integrity, is effective and efficient.

The need is to develop an invitation process that communicates the nature of the parish community to people before they come to visit, and that helps people make an informed choice about whether it even makes sense for them to visit. Good marketing is done in a manner that allows people to make informed and free decisions about the use of a product,

a service or membership in an organization. Good marketing helps people focus their energy and make more lasting commitments.

There is also a need to have a process of greeting, orienting and incorporating people in a way that is consistent with what they will experience as a member and begins to equip them for full participation in this particular community.

So, if the parish is striving for a culture in which people are both accepted and challenged, people need to see this early in their relationship with the community. It should not be all acceptance with the challenge appearing after you're "hooked." If the parish is serious about its task of Christian formation, then visitors and people considering membership need to experience opportunities for faith sharing, exploration of questions and doubts, and for training in Eucharistic worship and living. They need these experiences early on in the relationship rather than the all-too-frequent experience of being recruited into parish groups and jobs, and given a sense that the focus is on the institutional life of the parish rather than on its purpose. If the parish is really a place of deep prayer, then the environment of the space, the community's competence for worship, and offerings to train and coach people in prayer life need to strike new people early in their time with the parish.

The reason most people leave places of work is a lack of "fit" with the organizational culture. The person may be seeking a work environment that is participatory and empowering while the company's management style is more controlling. The same thing happens in parishes. Cultural issues (e.g., the style of spirituality and worship, the range of leadership styles commonly used, the degree of acceptance vs. challenge as part of the climate, openness to differences, the way in which the dynamics of closeness and separation are managed, and expectations about participation and giving) are matters over which people commit themselves or withdraw.

The entry and incorporation process needs to assist potential members and the parish community in making educated choices about a particular person's membership. The issue is not one of creating artificial or high standards. A parish church is by its nature a relatively open system. For the most part people make a decision to join and we accept them. We want people to make a right discernment, a wise choice about the parish they join. Parishes are not interchangeable.

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