

Useful grumbling



It's not of the Divine Charity if our grumbling breeds resentment, bitterness, and a willingness to damage a person's well-being. That said, let's be clear, all grumbling is not a sin. Benedict seems aware of "justifiable grumbling." Some grumbling may be for the well-being of the parish, even if it brings pain and conflict.

A second consideration is this – Benedict was an abbot in the 6th century. While his wisdom included "taking counsel" so that the whole community might be heard, the abbot made the decisions. The modern parish rector could learn from Benedict about "taking counsel" and the use of discipline in managing "faults." Listening to the whole community, especially those often not heard (in his time, the young) and the more experienced monks of the monastery might provide a broad range of guidance. Dealing with "faults" and grumbling involved two private warnings by the seniors, and if there is no amendment, a public rebuking, and if still no change, excommunication, and if still no change, corporal punishment. Today's rectors often lack the patience and wisdom to take things step by step. Something to learn there! Most would understand that corporal punishment would land them in court.

Here are a few examples of "useful grumbling."

Containment

Having a person or two with whom you share frustrations about parish life can be useful if it helps you, and them, move on from the emotion drama, *or* enter into a more reflective stance, *or* take the concern to an appropriate person as you seek some form of resolution. This is true for the parish and the laity of the parish.

For it to be useful:

- You and the others agree among yourselves that this is among you and not to be spread further
- You are allowing one another to blow-off-steam so as to allow you to move on
- You will acknowledge to one another if you are finding yourself building resentments and bitterness.
- You pray – You intercede for those you want to complain about. You offer your frustrations to God, you lay them upon the altar so you may be transformed.

Responsible participation

A few people start talking about a concern, something that has upset them, and in short order they come forward to discuss it with the person they are upset with.

A story - The priest was new to the parish and young. It was during a time when the "right thing" to do was to have a true Easter celebration celebrating the vigil late the night before Easter Day. So the young vicar made an announcement – this year they would have an

Easter Vigil and would not have a Eucharist on Easter Sunday because the congregation wasn't large enough to do both.

A couple of weeks passed. The parish musician came to the vicar to say that people were very upset about not having a celebration on Sunday. He said to musician, "tell people to come to me and we'll talk about it" He wasn't going to let musician take a position between him and members of the congregation.

At coffee hour on the following Sunday seven or eight people came up to the priest, "Father, can we talk? They went to a corner of the room. The members expressed their distress. The vicar acknowledged their pain and explained why he was moving in this direction. He said, "I think you'd love what the Vigil offers in your spiritual life. I'd like you to experience that." He then wondered if people would be willing to attend both the Vigil and an Easter Sunday Eucharist. They thought that was a splendid idea and agreed to do that. They immediately began to figure out the logistics including having a party after the vigil.

The parish went ahead with that plan. At the party after the Vigil a number of people came up to the priest. They said two things, first, "This was really amazing; we wish we had done this before in the parish." and secondly, would it be okay if we don't come tomorrow."

Comments on the story – 1) The parishioners were anxious about talking with the priest. The previous two vicars had reacted defensively and with anger when approached about their decisions. 2) Clearly the parishioners had been grumbling among themselves and they decided on approaching the priest in a manner that was initially cautious. They didn't decide to make threats (a not uncommon act in such situations). 3) The priest had received a significant amount of training in communication skills, managing his emotions and conflict. He drew on his training. 4) The priest's willingness to talk seems to have called forth their willingness to listen as well.

A sense of fairness and reasonableness

In Chapter 41 of the Rule we read, "the abbot may decide that they should continue to eat dinner at noon every day if they have work in the fields or if the summer heat remains extreme. Similarly, he should so regulate and arrange all matters that souls may be saved and the brothers may go about their activities without justifiable grumbling."

The task is the same for parish rectors. You will reduce the amount of grumbling in the parish if you arrange parish life and make decisions with a sense of fairness and reasonableness. That is to create structures, processes and a climate that keep the parish focused on the primary tasks of worship and the formation of members to be instruments of God's love in their daily life rather than multitudinism and institutionalism. Provide real opportunities for consultation. Generally, arrange parish life so there are few hassles in the little things of life.

Clergy and lay leaders can also create a climate in which people feel jerked around. The rector delegates a job and then has a "brainstorm" and gives new instructions. Or ministries are micromanaged selectively. Or there's a lot of tinkering, one change after another, small things usually but enough to unsettle people.

Temperament matters a lot here. The clergy's temperament indicates potential gifts and strengths. It also indicates the places where things go astray. The gift isn't trained and educated and so it gets overused or used without consultation with people of other temperaments and so used clumsily, or under stress the shadow side of the strength appears, and we act childish.

In these situations, our "justifiable grumbling" may be useful grumbling that serves the parish's life and work – if we grumble with humility and persistence.

Guide us in the way of justice and truth

There are situations that are not simply disagreements about a practice or event but are matters of justice and truth. The "no grumbling" norm can be used to suppress movement toward justice and truth.

Examples:

- Cover ups of sexual abuse and the misuse of power under the cover of authority.
- Clergy using their authority in a harsh or inept manner. Clergy acting in a manner that humiliates lay members, other clergy, or parish staff.
- A parish that is so conflict adverse that it has a history of allowing members to be forced out by the rector. Done several times over the years by different rectors with no resistance. People just disappear. In one case it involved a couple in the parish getting divorced. The rector then asked the wealthier, professional, more powerful husband to stay and "suggested" to the wife that she find another parish.
- Information about parish finances being hidden or distorted.

In all these cases "useful grumbling" followed by action would be appropriate. However, those involved may want to first consult with a person who could help them explore if the action they are considering is itself reasonable and not driven by a malicious spirit.