

Amen: Amid change, same message

I grew up in a family of 10 kids in Our Lady of Loretto Parish in Hometown, Ill. Yes, there is such a place as Hometown, a half-square-mile, full-fledged city in south suburban Chicago.

When people hear about the size of my family, I often get responses such as: “Ten kids! Oh, my gosh. What was that like?” It’s hard to say, because, for me, a full house was normal. We were not the biggest family in the parish. The Ruzichs had 11 kids; the Penders had 15. Lots of families had five, six or seven kids. This was the 1950s and ‘60s. Families tended to be bigger then.

In its heyday, OLL Parish had four priests on staff – one of them primarily served the nearby hospital. For the last couple of decades, the parish has had one priest. The parish boundaries are twice the size of Hometown itself, but even at that, the parish is just one square mile. The nearest parish churches are about a mile from my home church. We walked to school, and often to church. We biked everywhere. Nothing was that far away in our world.

My folks helped found Our Lady of Loretto in the early 1950s. Most of the duplex homes built when Hometown was established in 1953 were bought by veterans using the GI bill for mortgages.

One of my favorite things about the Baltimore area is that the homes and the people here feel a lot like South Side Chicago – friendly people, real neighborhoods, family values.

By the turn of the century, things had changed in Hometown. Young families were moving farther out into the suburbs for bigger homes and bigger lawns. And those who stayed didn’t have as many kids as the previous generation.

The parish elementary school has closed. My seminary high school closed, merged with its North Side counterpart into one campus. My college seminary campus closed, too; now it’s one dorm on the campus of a larger university. For now, Our Lady of Loretto Parish is open and staffed by a full-time priest, but someday, perhaps, it might be served by a priest who is assigned also to a nearby parish.

Through all of this change, the message of the church remains the same: Jesus Christ – yesterday, today and forever, as St. John Paul II reminded us during our celebrations of the jubilee of the second millennium. For us Catholics, the church is not the building. It's the people of God, gathered in the name of the Lord.

Certainly, it helps for us to have worship spaces that bring a community together and provide a place to call home. When I visited my aging parents in Hometown, going to Mass with them felt comfortable, right. But going to church is not supposed to just be about feeling comfortable. Jesus asks us at times to step out of our comfort zone, to welcome strangers. Sometimes, it's the Samaritan – the outsider – who shows us what it truly means to be a neighbor.

Changes are coming to the Archdiocese of Baltimore. According to the **proposed pastorate plan** released in October, parishes will begin working together in ways they may not have done before. That might make some uncomfortable, but it also can be healthy and life-giving, as we move from maintenance of parish structures to focusing on the mission, as Archbishop William E. Lori tells us, to spread the Good News of Jesus.

Hometown doesn't have big families anymore. There are not enough priests to provide four for a small parish such as Our Lady of Loretto. And now, permanent deacons can exercise some sacramental ministries, and lay people can and should be much more involved in the work of the parish.

Times have changed. No parish is the same as it was 50 or 100 years ago. It is time we acknowledge that and plan for the future.

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