

Focus on the good, share the gifts of the spirit

So, happy New Year and Thanksgiving! What? This is September. Did the heat this summer finally fry my brain? (I might be the last to notice!)

Well, as we all know, the calendar year does change in January, but September is the real “new year.” After a sort of summer slumber, the world does begin anew: schools reopen, religious education classes start up, parish meetings for pastoral councils and Knights of Columbus and Holy Name Society and Sodality and RCIA and Bible studies, and prayer groups, and youth groups, and on and on.

Even God seems to take a vacation. Conversions are “down” from June through August, but church membership and attendance picks up again in the fall. So happy New Year!

My reference to Thanksgiving is a personal idea. I’ve always wanted to just write a letter of thanks to the faithful parishioners who keep our church alive. We are informed, often on a daily basis in the media, of all that is wrong with organized religion. What we are not always reminded of is what would be wrong with a world without religion!

Studies indicate that many people drop in and drop out, leave and return, to church. Were it not for the faithful people in the pews there would be no church to return to. We “leave the lights on” for people during Lent to return to church for confession, for the sacrament of reconciliation. Were it not for the faithful members there would be no one to pay BGE!

(Which reminds me of one of my favorite true stories. I asked a retired FBI agent about his favorite experiences. He told about a man who robbed a bank one morning, and by the time he got back to his home, the FBI were there to arrest him! “How did you find me so quickly?” the man asked. Bill replied: “We used the latest scientific knowledge!” What the agent did not tell the man is that he had written his hold-up note on the back of his gas and electric bill!) But I digress!

Critics often refer to the job of the laity as “pay, pray and obey!” As part of the people of God, the laity are obviously so much more. But is paying, praying and obeying really so bad?

The Gospels tell us that Jesus had women who followed him and took care of his needs. St. Paul in his letters frequently refers to collections. To have a ministry we need support for the ministry.

Prayer is at the heart of the church. St. Paul told us to pray constantly. Jesus taught us how to pray as he prayed! We can obviously pray anywhere, but our churches are places to pray as a community. We need holy places to remind us that we are holy. We need sacred spaces to remind us that all the world is sacred.

And obey doesn't mean serfs following a nobleman. Obey is about sheep following the call of the Good Shepherd. Without a place to listen to God's voice, how can we ever hear that voice? The gods of the world are well publicized and well funded: lust, greed, consumerism, materialism and so on. If not the church, who will teach the world about the gifts of the spirit: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

The failings of priests are constantly recounted. But what I hear from most parishioners is that their priests are gentle, kind, selfless and hard working. As I say so often: what we focus on we get more of. If we focus on what's wrong, we'll see more of what's wrong. If we focus on what's good, we'll see more of what's good.

St. Paul put it so well when he said that we “carry this treasure in earthen-ware jars.” The treasure is God. The earthen-ware jars are us. We all need all of us to help carry the message, and to help carry each other.

All of which reminds me of a famous statement by Father Andrew Greeley: “If you can find a perfect church, by all means join it. But remember, the minute you join it, it won't be perfect anymore!”