

Selling the sizzle at a parish near you

“Marketing is a contest for people’s attention.” — Seth Godin

I heard about a parish recently. It has regular eucharistic adoration, but only the old-timers show up, and their numbers are shrinking. There is some handwringing over this fact. Nobody wants to see it disappear when its current devotees disappear. The funny thing is, nobody talks it up either. Not from the pulpit. Not in the bulletin. Nada.

It may be hard for people who love adoration to realize, but we now have had at least two generations that know very little, if anything, about what it is, how to do it and why. And if we keep it a secret, soon it will be three generations.

And it isn’t just adoration. It’s confession. It’s novenas. It’s May crownings and the rosary and a whole lot more.

Catholic practices need practice, but our parishes are full of very busy, very distracted and often woefully undereducated Catholics.

Which leads me to good Catholic reading. There are lots of great Catholic books being published, but how do Catholics ever hear about them? Bookstores are an endangered species. Advertising is expensive for publishers. For many Catholics, finding out what is a good read and what is only mediocre is work.

Or take something really basic, like holy days of obligation. Most Catholics don’t darken the door, though they pack it in for Ash Wednesday, which is not a holy day.

Ash Wednesday is popular in part because it sells itself: “See my ashes. Did you get yours?” But it also gets talked up well in advance. Pastors know it is popular. Do we do the same for holy days, or do we assume no one is coming?

Oh, we’ve got trouble, as Professor Harold Hill might say, right here in River City. Professor Hill of “The Music Man” fame was a con man of sorts, but he did know

marketing. That is, he knew how to get people's attention. And under the heading of "wise as serpents," I think we need parishes to start using their ingenuity to get people's attention.

Take eucharistic adoration: Is it being offered at times convenient for families, for young people? Are there ways to talk it up at the pulpit, or ways that laypeople can testify to how powerful it can be? Are there ways to lure people in even if only for 15 minutes before work so they can savor the holy silence?

Or confession. Lots of times it is only offered from 3 to 4 on Saturday afternoon, just when families are looking for something to do ... not. One parish I know offered the sacrament at drive time in the evening: commuter confession attracting people on their way home from work. A downtown parish offered it at lunch hour for office workers.

As for Catholic reading, we can take a cue from evangelical churches and talk about books from the pulpit. I knew a pastor who held a Catholic book fair twice a year. Local religious booksellers would set up in the gathering area. At the end of Mass, he would talk up his favorite ones to his captive audience. Then people left Mass and cleaned out those booksellers of all their copies.

You might call some of this adult faith formation, but heck, just call it marketing. Laypeople can help, but nothing beats a pastor's enthusiasm. What we can't do any longer is same old, same old and expect people to show up.

So instead of blaming the audience or simply wringing one's hands, start selling the sizzle and see who comes to try the steak.

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