

# **THE PRIEST AND HIS RURAL PARISH**

---

• Noe de los Santos

The Church is a sacramental communion of spiritual life — that is, of faith, hope and charity. A parish, though only a small section of it considered quantitatively, is qualitatively the same such communion. In effect, with the parish priest in communion with his bishop, whom he indeed represents as its leader and at the same time as God's ambassador to it, the community of the parish signifies the fellowship of its members with God and of the same members among themselves. By way of instrument, the same community conduces to such fellowship.

While this communion is a gift of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, it grows through the faithful parishioners' and their parish priest's conscientious performance of their respective mission in a motive issuing from faith, hope and love. Hence, on the part of the parish priest, who at all times ought truly to represent his bishop, it is essential and even urgent that he lead all his faithful into an active, fruitful and meaningful Christian life. This he must do by way of instruction, government and blessing.

## **THE WAY OF INSTRUCTION**

In rural parishes, a priest who only says Mass and administers sacraments is downright irrelevant. Most rural people never had formal Catholic education. Unsurprisingly, there are many, in fact, who do not know, for instance, why a person must be baptized; why he ought to confess his sins; why he is to participate in the Eucharistic Celebration on Sunday; why there are fiestas, etc. etc. Apparently, they do comply with all these and other religious activities; but it might only be so because they see others do them and they do not wish to be different, or because they believe they are all ordinances from on high, or they are merely carried by the tide of tradition, whose purport they never knew.

Surely it *can* mean they have great faith? But faith, besides meaning assent to all things that God has revealed in the Church, also, and inseparably so, entails seeking to understand as much as we can the things revealed by God and proposed by the Church. But the rural people cannot have an inkling of understanding as regards the matter of faith and the Catholic practices without the priest teaching them. On the other hand, they *ought not* to be abandoned in the dark!

A formal schooling is not necessary to give them some intelligent foundation in the Catholic faith and practices. If a priest could perform the baptismal rite in a dramatic and unhurrying manner; if he could celebrate the Holy Mass articulately as well as with propriety and due reverence; if he could bless and talk well-meaningly, he would be teaching the faithful attending to him perhaps better than if he instructed them formally.

Certainly, though, it is ideal to have a sort of Sunday school. In fact, in a way it is necessary. For one thing, it is highly doubtful that the majority of the faithful sufficiently understand the mystery of Christ and the Church, or who Yahweh is, or who Moses, Abraham, Isaac etc. are that they often hear (and indistinctly hear!) in the Mass readings. In the olden days people used to read or sing the *Pasion*; but such time-honored practices has also yielded to time. They keep no bibles anymore or catechetical books. On the part of those who have some understanding, they seem to find no time for teaching or explaining to their younger ones the meaning of certain Catholic practices they still perform knowing them. — Why can't they be instructed in Salvation History and in the fundamentals of the Catholic faith and morals?

One of the causes why some parishioners join the Iglesia ni Kristo or the Seventh Day Adventists or the Jehovah's witnesses is certainly ignorance, if not disgust. One convert to Iglesia ni Kristo recounted to me how "devout" he was in counting his beads, decorating images, making signs of the cross and complying with other pious works; and yet, he said, he turned away from the Catholic Church in search of enlightenment. Asked if he found the truth in the Iglesia ni Kristo, he retorted their ministers *do teach* them. And the truly delegated teachers, the Catholic priests, do not!

In places where heretical sects have gained no foothold the old adage may aptly be borne in mind: "Prevention is better than cure." But, actually, there is only one intelligent way of preventing them from falling into error; that is, by grounding them in the truth. The fear that nobody or very few would attend a weekly or a bi-weekly religious instruction, is no reason to impede a priest from imparting it. Similarly, in regard to the regular Sunday homily, the fact that it is a part of the ordinary and repeated schedule, is no reason why a priest should make no diligent preparation for it — why he should not give it fullness of due efforts and insistence.

Scripture has something in this connection. In his second letter Saint Peter insisted, "I intended to recall these things to you *constantly, even though you already understand and are firmly rooted in the truth you possess*. I consider it my duty, as long as I live..." (1:12f). And then in the following chapter he warns his faithful against false teachers. — One, on reading this, wonders if our local parish priests are following in the path laid down by the head of the Apostles.

What has thus far been said as regards religious instruction of adults is also applicable to children. But suffice it here to add that catechism for them may not be left to the catechists alone. These, in many places, have often had bellyaches for lack of intelligent care and supervision. Asking for the cooperation of parents and guardians and neighbors and organizing the catechists are not enough: the priestly presence in their midst is necessary, and not merely expedient.

But, as we know, people live by symbols. That is why, they naturally like participating in processions, celebrating fiestas, holding programs on various occasions, and doing many other colorful activities. These activities keep a message or a story behind, which has now been buried in the dust of time. When no better and more acceptable substitute may be given they must be retained, inasmuch as they are instructive. In these our days of renewal we do well bearing in mind that change is valid only when its end will edify. In reality, renewal will edify. In reality, renewal has a meaning deeper than commitment.

Hence, why can't processions, for instance, be made after a short explanation of their meaning? Why can't the significance of fiestas be brought back to the people's mind? Nine

days or evenings before important feasts the faithful assemble in the church to pray novena. In our days only a few do this. Let more people participate, and this is an occasion for the priest or for any capable leader at that to shed light on the meaning of their activity. For, on the other hand, rational beings must not be blindly carried by the stream of tradition they make; or it is fatuous continuing with novenas and other religious functions which the participants do not understand. Thus, Christmas and Holy Week must be so celebrated that the faithful participate fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rites and enriched by their effects.

Renewal always supposes knowledge. And if its end is conscious, active and fruitful growth in the spiritual life, which the community of the parish should engender and at the same time signify, the proper instruction by the parish priest and everyone assisting him is an absolute necessity. To be more effective, though, the parish must further have discipline; hence, its head must be able to govern them.

### THE WAY OF DISCIPLINE

Parochial government aims at making the faithful understand more easily and feel more readily that they form a communion of life, charity and truth. Its necessity is quite evident upon recognizing that profession in the same faith and reception of the same sacraments are not enough to signify and at the same time effectuate a palpable fellowship. But the matter of parochial government or discipline is not merely to be understood as order; it must further clearly involve intelligent co-operation oriented towards promoting the integral, but primarily spiritual, well-being of the Christian community that the parish is. For this purpose, the unifying forces must be strong — faith, hope and love. And hence, the parish priest may not brush aside the parish council and the lay religious organizations.

*The Parish Council.* This council is supposed to assist the parish priest in the administration of the parish. As of now, in the rural parishes, its existence is manifest only when church construction or the like activity which the parish priest alone cannot manage, is to be made. Where payment is impossible, it is argued that its function may be limited to those aforementioned. And yet to keep the council alive and give it relevance, why

can't they be given share in the government of the parish, however minor the work that may be duly apportioned them. The idea is to promote a sort of collegiality and dialogue; or, to make one aspect more explicit, to make all parishioners recognize their being part and parcel of the church, which they have hitherto identified with the hierarchy. Such tasks, for example, as distributing labor to various lay associations in the parish as well as seeing to it that the duties are complied with, may be the council. Even the assignment of Sunday or daily lectors may be taken under its charge. Actually, one of the causes why men keep away from the church is that they find no manly work therein. Letting them share, therefore, is apostolate itself.

*The Lay Religious Associations* help much both in the administration and the instruction of the parishioners. In some rural parishes they are the only ones that keep alive religious activities. And where catechetical instruction, either for adults or for children, is non-existent they are likewise the only ones that preserve Catholic education, though understandably in a minimum way. And they can do many, many more things for the development of the parish. Only they are not actuated!

The multiple membership, to which many a devout parishioner resorts to, and which is current in most rural parishes, reveals the desire of the faithful to involve themselves more and more intimately in the Church. Without direction, however, it can be, and in fact is, an unhealthy sign — at least extrinsically. For one thing, there is the danger of failing to fulfill obligations, spiritual or otherwise. For another thing, it does not promote greater commitment of a greater number of people. The few who are indeed active tend to monopolize, and often have succeeded in monopolizing, the church activities. The parish should be so governed that collegiality is fostered and promoted. Let other faithful find their joy in sharing the work of the parish. Let them share in the church activities.

In our diocese, with the exception of the Legion of Mary, lay religious associations in the rural parishes such as San Jose, Del Carmen, Apostolate of Prayer, Children of Mary, Lourdes etc. do not have apostolate outside the circle of the members. They assist the relatives of a dead member; they contribute for the Mass when their respective feasts come, but on other occasions they don't even show signs of life. One

may logically doubt whether they still regularly fulfill their individual spiritual obligations. On the other hand, there are many things in the parish that appear to be exclusive works of a few persons or a few organizations. Open some tasks for others and let them share!

All this leads to questioning why membership may not be limited to one or two organizations only. Actually, there are more advantages in such limitation. Among others, it will enhance communitarian spirit, and it will ease the work of the parish priest who will (and should) be teaching the same truths to different people and so need not become a broken record to some members who belong to different organizations. It will surely teach them what the nature of the Church member is as a member among many.

*The Legion of Mary.* Among the lay religious associations in our diocese, the Legion of Mary is exceptional. It alone has visibly integrated prayer and work, tears and laughter, and thus it is very significant of an ideal Christian life, wherein personal sanctification is one with social apostolate and work is considered a blessing and a share in a mission. All this should mean to demand a special care and study from the part of the spiritual directors, who usually are the parish priests themselves.

In passing, there are things legionaries should be conversant with. For example, they should know the art of dealing with people. This is very much required of them when with those whom we might term "strayed sheep." And it is likewise necessary for them when they are within the circle of practical and devout Catholics. In effect, their attitudes should never provoke displeasure or envy; instead they must manifest attractive friendliness while being conscious that their mission must bear fruit. On the part of the parish priest, he has many things to learn from the legion's structure and government; he might as well introduce some feasible activities into other associations.

*The Parish and the Local Government.* Because the parishioners are also part of the local body politic, a healthy relationship must be maintained between the parish and the local government. Distinction must indeed be recognized between their fields of labor; but cooperation must always, on the other hand, be sought and fostered, and every united endeavor must evince its aim of genuinely promoting the well-being of the community.

Rural politics today deserves the continual observation, and even the proper intervention, of the parish priests. Without antagonizing political parties, the priest must not leave his flock uninstructed in their rights and duties regarding the political society; as for example, the right to vote and vote freely. He must instill in them the sense of social responsibility, which in our days is getting swallowed up by the lust for the politicians' ill-gotten money. But in whatever prudent manner he may do it, he must be sure he has given some religious meaning into his action; otherwise he loses his priestly role.

Likewise, the faithful must be conscious of their significant part in the political and economic affairs of their community; these are included in the field of their mission as Christians. In so doing they in effect manifest that Christianity extends beyond the walls of the church into all aspects of human life.

### THE WAY OF BLESSING

Parish activity is not merely learning, nor only working; it is also living in the hope that it is growing in communion with the true source of life and being. This communion of life that the parish lives is best shown in the active, conscious and fruitful participation in the sacred liturgy, the excellent sign and instrument of fellowship that the Church is. Therefore it should always be the objective of the parish community to draw everyone everytime closer to it.

The Second Vatican Council has it: "In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle. we sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Savior, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until He, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with Him in glory."

Consequently, through continual proper instruction the parish community should be made recognize the utmost importance of Mass and the Sacraments. For this purpose, the convenience of the greatest number of participants in the com-

munity should be taken into account; as regards the Mass schedule, for example. In the rural areas the people go to farm around six in the morning; accordingly, the weekday Mass may be celebrated around five a.m., so that those willing may be able to participate. Actually, the rural people would like to hear the bells first before any other sound.

In the barrios where distance is an obstacle to going to Mass on Sunday, the practice of the priest himself going to the barrio to celebrate Mass there is indeed most proper and most heartening. Besides being the occasion for him to vicariously experience his distant parishioners' hard life, this will further signify his blessing their lot and labor. We must never forget the dignity of labor; we should make it ever inspire people instead. Its difficulty should lead everyone to the Eucharist, where rest after work and strength before it is ever to be found.

In other most proper ways priestly favors must be bestowed on the unfortunate. Most of these do not come to church, not because they do not know God, but oftentimes because they find no inspiration inside it; they feel as though outcast and abandoned by the priest. Let them not grow too much conscious of their penury to remember their riches in hope; let them see their part in the church.

This is the goal of the parish: to be true to itself, and itself is a communion of life, truth and love signified and engendered by the visible community of all the baptized living within the parochial territory.