

A DAY OF PARISH RENEWAL

A PACKAGE-PLAN FOR THE BUSY PARISH PRIEST

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Pastors ever since Vatican II have been faced with the heavy burden of bringing their parishioners up to date with the countless changes in the Church. Since most parish priests in the Philippines are overworked even without this added burden, they have little time for planning or developing programs geared to the re-education of their people. For this reason I would like to share with you the results of a small but very successful experiment held in St. Peter's Parish of Pamplona, Cagayan.

THE EXPERIMENT

The experiment consisted of "A Day" of Parish Renewal". It was made up of a *four-hour program*, carefully planned so that the short time could be used to maximum effect.

The aims were three: (1) to provide an annual "retreat" for the people, (2) to heighten awareness of our Christian *community* and (3) to acquaint parishioners with the language and aims of Vatican II and thus interest them in a deeper self-study of the council documents.

A Saturday afternoon was chosen as the most ideal time to stage the renewal, again for three reasons: (1) it was the time when the great-

est number of people could attend, (2) it was a time the parish priest could manage and (3) those who attended could at the same time fulfill their Sunday obligation.

The short "retreat" was suggested by the Knights of Columbus. They sponsored it and did much to assure its smooth operation. Weeks before the actual date announcements were made at Sunday Mass and invitations were extended to all parishioners. Teen-agers and students were also expressly invited. Many of them actually took part even though another day of renewal geared to their own level was already in the planning stage. Elementary school children were expressly excluded to leave more room for adults and to avoid needless distractions. In any case the activities were beyond their comprehension.

To make the afternoon more inviting, the actual program was posted at the entrance of the church weeks in advance. This announcing of a definite program helped make the day of renewal both realistic and promising. At the same time it aroused enough curiosity to keep the people interested until the program was over.

Since the greatest amount of work and planning went into the program, it is this which will save much time for the busy priest who might like to use or adapt it. Therefore, first I shall present the program as it appeared on the bulletin board. Then I shall offer some practical, behind-the-scene stage directions for the priest. These small but important hints were gathered from the experience of the day. They will help assure the smooth operation of the tightly packed, but well varied program.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Solemn Enthronement of the Bible. After the bells have called the faithful to church and they have taken their places, the afternoon opens with a solemn *procession* and enthronement of the Bible on the main altar between two lighted candles. The procession is led by two servers with incense boat and thurible.

Since it is unwieldy to have the whole congregation join the procession, a representative group, well prepared, will make a more solemn

and dignified impression. In our case, since the Knights of Columbus sponsored the afternoon, they marched in procession behind the lead servers. Two more servers with lighted candles flanked the priest carrying an impressive edition of the Holy Bible. (The Jerusalem Bible is highly recommended for its clarity and readability as well as for its impressive format.)

When the procession returns to the sanctuary, the non-servers take their places in reserved pews in the front. Meanwhile the Bible is enthroned on the main altar and solemnly incensed. During the procession a joyful hymn is sung, preferably one in which all can join.

An opening prayer is then said before the Bible. This prayer will depend on the season and on the exact theme of the afternoon. For our purposes we found ideal a prayer from "The Spirit of Renewal," in *Scripture Services* (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville), p. 112.

After short invocations by the priest the people can be invited to respond, "Spirit of God, fill us with your life," or something similarly short. In this way the faithful are actively and spontaneously engaged in the prayer without need for lengthy instruction or prayer books.

At the end of the prayer the priest brings the Bible solemnly to the ambo and reads the chosen selection. The passage will depend on the theme of the homily chosen by the celebrant. In appendix we will give the readings selected as well as the homilies preached.

When the homily is finished it is necessary to make a few announcements to the congregation:

1. Remind them to *drop any questions about Church renewal or any other topic in the box provided* at the rear of the church. Slips of paper and a ball pen (preferably on a string!) should also be handy. In our day of renewal so many interesting questions were asked about even the simplest things that the *Dialogue* at 5:00 p.m. turned out to be highly interesting. But they should jot down their questions right away, especially those aroused by the homily just preached. The slips will allow people to ask questions that have been puzzling them without their identity becoming known.

2. Remind them that *spiritual reading is available at the back of church*. Though there will be little time for reading, it is hoped that the people will take some literature home and accustom themselves to reading the Catholic press. Back issues of magazines like *New City*, *Mission World*, *Home Life* can usually be obtained free from publishers as means of promoting their magazines. This is also an excellent opportunity for the parish priest to clean out the convention! The ideas to provide this literature was parked by finding stacks of back issues of the *Sodality Digest*, old pamphlets, etc. cluttering office. The peoples were happy to get them and I was happy to get rid of them!

3. If confessions were not completed between 2:00 and 2:30 p.m., *confession will again be available before Mass*. It will be ideal if another priest will be available to help with this task during the afternoon.

4. Finally, remind them to *stretch their legs before the Community Eucharistic Sacrifice which begins in so-and-so many minutes*. This helps to freshen their minds for the next event and provides a convivial community spirit. A bell will be rung to call them in for Mass.

Community Eucharistic Sacrifice. If there is only one priest in a provincial parish, he can cancel the early morning Mass in the centro and avail of the morning opportunity to say Mass in a barrio. The people should be informed at least a week before from the pulpit and by a notice on the bulletin board.

After the homily, once again a few reminders:

1. The possibility of fulfilling the Sunday Mass obligation if the renewal is held Saturday afternoon .

2. Since the first homily dealt with "God's People" and stressed that we are a people "on pilgrimage", the people were requested to come down the main aisle for Communion, at random, and receive Holy Communion, two by two, *standing*. Since the Philippine Bishops' directive to receive Communion kneeling is followed faithfully throughout the year, this single instance can have the force of a powerful *living parable* of the "parish on pilgrimage" (like the Jews of old wandering in the desert and eating manna for their food).

Permission can easily be obtained for this exception, or if time does not permit, it can easily be presumed since when Holy Communion is received from the chalice, it is even *obligatory to stand*.¹

3. Since many will be wondering what "*agape*" means, the next event on the program, a two-minute explanation would be in order. Tell the people simply that in the early Church, as at the Last Supper, Holy Communion was often received at a common "love-banquet." A family is most closely knit at meal time. In order, therefore, to deepen the meaning of receiving Christ together, all present at the Mass should enjoy a light merienda together.

In our case the snack consisted of pineapple punch and filled sandwiches. The Catholic women gladly took care of the preparation. Over 250 people were fed at a cost of roughly P55.00. It was explained that the offering at Mass (collecta) would go into a common fund to provide the merienda for all. In this way everyone present gave according to his means and everyone felt equally welcome at the table.

The brief word of explanation helped raise the collection to P25.00, four times the average amount given at Sunday Mass. A donation of P20.00 helped defray expenses and the balance of P10.00 was paid by the Knights of Columbus.

After the Mass this joyful little gathering will be heartily received by the parishioners. It gives them a chance to rest, recuperate, comment on the renewal, laugh, joke, express their brother and get their blood circulating for the next item on the program.

Dialogue. During the renewal I reminded the listeners twice to jot down any questions about the church they might like answered. A good twenty questions turned up. Several were similar, but most were questions of depth that opened *my eyes* to some of the things that perplex my people, while I have been answering questions that perhaps did not bother them at all!

The half-hour merienda break gives the priest a chance to get a bite himself and sift through the questions handed in. It will be helpful

¹ Cf. *Ritus Communiois sub utraque specie* (Rome, March 7, 1965).

to arrange the questions according to topics, then put the more important topics on top of the pile. This preview of the questions lets the priest gather a few ideas together so that the answers will be orderly and satisfying.

If the *Agape* goes a little overtime, it will make little difference. It is better to wait till it has run its course, then ring the bell for the *Dialogue*.

It will be a refreshing change of pace to keep the *dialogue* quite informal. Perhaps stand near the entrance to the sanctuary, clad in sottana only, in order to have closer contact with the people.

Many of the questions can be answered in a vein of light humor. This is always possible when you can ride on the suspense provided by a batch of anonymous questions!

The element of humor was absolutely necessary in our case. Just as we began, a group of politicians moved into the plaza outside the church and their amplifier was several watts stronger than mine! Nevertheless the people showed keen interest in the questions and answers. So much so that I decided to drop a third homily that had originally been scheduled and instead spend the full time with *Dialogue*. The third homily was planned in case there were no questions. There will be plenty.

The *Dialogue* is a very important part of the program. It provides not only a mental relief after three hours of intense concentration, but it also gives the parish priest a chance to solve problems perplexing many of his parishioners.

Watch carefully for signs of common restlessness. Then if you still have questions on hand, end the dialogue with the promise of answering them in talks at a future date. Then retire to the sacristy to prepare for the *Solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament*.

During benediction a brief, appropriate closing prayer can be said to tie together the main thoughts of the afternoon. At this stage of the program, the emphasis is on *brief!*

SUMMING UP

The people of Pamplona seemed to be genuinely moved by the renewal. In a small town like ours it had the added attraction of being the biggest social event of many months. This might account for some of the interest. But surely the Bible Service, the fresh approach to the Mass, the Agape and the Dialogue drew and held the people on merits of their own.

Many parishioners went out of their way to show their gratitude for the experience. Some commented, "If only we had known it would be so nice, we would have convinced many others to come." Well, they can do that next year.

In spite of the limitations involved in introducing something almost completely new, we managed to fill about three-fourths of our church with roughly 300 people at the outset. After the Mass, we lost most of the teen-agers to the jazz music blaring in the plaza, as could be expected!

Since from a human standpoint the day was so successful for a small *poblacion* of 1500 people, and since several fellow priests have asked for copies of the program, I would like to make it available to others. It is my hope that it will help lighten the load of their long working-day and help them to bring Christ ever deeper into the hearts of their people.