

Seeds in Good Soil

Examining the Challenges of Making Catholic Social Teaching a Constituent Part of Parish Life in the United States

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(Matt. 13:3-9)*

by Tom Cordaro
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a Pax Christi USA resource for small group discussion

October 2012

Dear friends,

The following reflections were written by Tom Cordaro. Tom is a Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace, a member of the Pax Christi Anti-Racism Team, and has worked as the Justice and Outreach Minister at a parish for the past 15 years. These reflections were originally posted as a series for the Bread for the Journey blog on the Pax Christi USA website in September and October of 2012. Tom has added prayers and reflection questions to the original reflections in creating this resource for small groups.

Many of you using this resource have been deeply involved in social justice ministry within your parishes. We hope that the material in this small group reflection process may serve to help you deepen that ministry and explore new questions and directions. Pax Christi local groups, in particular local groups associated with parishes, might want to consider using these articles for reflection and study as part of your regular meeting. Regional leaders may want to incorporate the articles into your newsletters, for discussion at a regional event, or for commenting over regional email lists and blogs/websites.

We're interested in hearing your responses. Please consider posting comments on the website in the comments area after each section of the article. You can find the original articles by putting "Seeds in Good Soil" in the search box on the homepage. Additionally, Tom welcomes direct feedback and can be reached at cordarotom@gmail.com.

In peace.

*Johnny Zokovitch
Director of Communications, Pax Christi USA*

[A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: These reflections are a product of and limited by my own social location as a white, middle-aged, middle-class male layman working in an upper middle class suburban parish.]

Part One: Best Kept Secret?

Opening Prayer:

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

God of Our Longing and Source of Our Joy,
You have sent us into the field of your Church
in search of a harvest of justice and peace.

Our hands and hearts have toiled in your garden;
even where the soil is too rocky and depleted
to produce a crop of justice and peace.

Help us to always remember that we are merely the workers
and that you are the master gardener.
We work the soil, but you cause the growth.

Give us the wisdom to see what needs to be done in the garden.
Give us the courage to do the hard work
of breaking the clods and turning over the soil
to prepare your people to receive the seed of your call to justice and peace.

We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus and in communion with your Holy Spirit, Amen.

Reflection: Best Kept Secret?

It has often been said that Catholic Social Teaching is the best kept secret in the Catholic Church. I hear it mostly from Catholic peace and justice activists when expressing their frustration over the perceived lack of interest and involvement in peace and justice work in their parish.

It certainly is the case that the vast majority of Catholics in the pew are ignorant of what the Church teaches about social justice and peace. But there is an assumption underlying this observation that I think needs to be examined more carefully. The assumption is that if we could just fill parishioners' heads with information about Catholic Social Teaching and give them some hands-on experience of

those who suffer social injustice or violence, we could create socially-conscious, politically-active Catholic parishes. If we could just get priests to preach on Catholic Social Teaching, we could energize our parishioners and enlist them in the struggle to transform the world. If we could just get parishioners to attend this class or that seminar, or register for this book study series, or join this peace and justice group, we could create a parish dedicated to the cause of social justice and peace.

I am coming to the conclusion that the challenge is much deeper and more profound than a lack of exposure to Catholic Social Teaching or human suffering. We have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to plant the good seed of Catholic Social Teaching in soil that is incapable of bearing “a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Of course engaging in all or even some of the activities described above can produce some positive results. All of these strategies can help increase the base of support for social justice and peace in a parish. Over time, one might even increase the number of parishioners who join our parish peace and justice groups or who become politically and socially engaged activists in our community. But even this optimistic outcome would only impact a very small number of parishioners and most likely only for a short period of time.

As someone who has tried all of the strategies listed above, I can speak from personal experience to the limitations of this approach. (On the other hand I do recognize the possibility that the real limitations could be my own lack of skills in doing parish-based peace and justice work. That said, I think there is ample evidence that I am not alone in my experience.)

In this series of reflections, I will be describing some of these deeper and more fundamental challenges to the social mission of the parish described by the U.S. Catholic Bishops: “to build local communities of faith where our social teaching is central, not fringe; where social ministry is integral not optional; where it is the work of every believer, not just the mission of a few committed people” (*Communities of Salt & Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish*, 1993). I will also attempt to prescribe some possible strategies for addressing these challenges.

Questions:

1. How would you describe your efforts at making Catholic Social Teaching central to the life of your parish?
2. Why do you think that many of the strategies and programs to make Catholic Social Teaching a constituent part of parish life often fall short?
3. What do you think might be some of the deeper and more fundamental challenges to making Catholic Social Teaching central to the life your parish?

Part Two: Are We the Consumers of Christ?

Opening Prayer:

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Author of Life and Womb of all Creation,
You cleared a space to plant the seed of justice and peace
in the hearts of your people.

You sent your Holy Spirit to break open that seed and cause it to grow.
But there are many thorns and thistles choking the life from your planting
and we often feel helpless to save what your right hand has planted.

These thorns and thistles have entered our own hearts and have taken root in your sanctuary.
They make us forget who we are and why you have called us to be your people.

And so we pray that once more you will clear a space
for your seed of justice and peace to grow.

Turn our hearts away from the love of gain and the allure of the market place.
Teach us once again what it means to proclaim your Son as Lord and Savior. Amen.

Reflection: Are We the Consumers of Christ

In my last reflection, I suggested that the reason why Catholic Social Teaching is not embraced by many Catholics in the pew is not only because most parishioners are unfamiliar with the teaching. There are deeper and more profound reasons why Catholic Social Teaching remains peripheral to the life of most parishes. We have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to plant the good seed of Catholic Social Teaching in soil that is incapable of bearing fruit. In this post, I will describe some of the attributes of this "rocky soil."

We are all familiar with the devastating impact of addictive consumerism on most Americans. Increasingly, for rich and poor alike, we are defined by the quality and quantity of what we produce and consume. Far too many view our planet as a commodity that exists primarily for the extraction of resources. And in this consumer culture, the poor are often viewed as surplus population that serve no real purpose in the market because they have no money to participate in the community of consumption. Even in the midst of the current economic meltdown caused by Wall Street, great deference is paid to the rich and powerful because they are the "job creators." And we are told that in

order to pull ourselves out of this economic mess, we need to get people in the stores buying more stuff.

Addictive consumerism is the product of a free market culture that is so pervasive in the United States that we are often unaware of the power it has in shaping our lives. This market mentality influences our most intimate human encounters and emotions. Even courtship and dating are now governed by the market. Speed dating makes inter-personal relationships more efficient and makes side-by-side comparisons easier. Finding a life-long partner is now made easy with market-developed questionnaires that can help us zero in on potential mates that are pre-screened for compatibility by experts in the field.

The ultimate aim of free market culture is to transform every human interaction into a commodity that can be marketed and sold—including our experience of Church. Beyond the challenges addictive consumerism poses to the pastoral work of the Church; the real danger is in the way our free market culture has changed the way we do Church. The influence of this free market mentality has been so subtle and pervasive we are often unaware of how profoundly it has changed the role of the Church in society and how it has shaped the way the Church functions.

Over time the Church has moved from being a primary institution of social formation to being nothing more than one of many competing providers of products and services available through the market. The Church is no longer a counterforce to the encroachment of free market culture – it is often an enabler. Within this dominant culture the Church’s role is limited to providing religious goods and services to their customers. Successful parishes are ones that are able to increase their market share by providing better goods and services than the church down the road.

Following the logic of the market, the primary goal of most parish renewal programs is to “do church better.” The hope is that if parishes can do church better they can put more people in the pews: if we build a better church, they will come. Pastoral ministers will often assert that success is not measured by the numbers of people who show up. But when it comes to answering that most challenging and dreaded question, “What do we do next year?” the response by many parish professionals is framed by a market strategy that is not that much different from what goes on in most public relations and marketing firms – only these firms do it better.

This market strategy starts with determining what religious goods and services are desired by our customers (i.e. parishioners) with special attention to appealing to those who do not currently participate in parish life. How do we reel them in? How do we establish brand loyalty? (And for the more cynical; how can we get them to be consistent donors?) Parishes will often circulate questionnaires, organize focus groups or hold parish town-hall meetings to get the data they need to develop next year’s product line. And if they are successful, they will be able to meet their marketing goals for the year — and maybe even open that coffee shop off the narthex that parishioners have been clamoring for.

The problem is this: if we treat parishioners like customers, they will act like customers. When asked to evaluate their parish, customers will talk about what they like about the parish and what they don’t like. If they have a complaint, it will often be expressed in terms of the failure of the parish to meet their needs pastorally or theologically. Parish loyalty for many parishioners is now market driven: what do I get in return for my investment of time and money in this parish? Decisions about participation in the

parish are also market driven: among all the choices I have in the marketplace, what experience or activity gives me what I most desire this weekend?

This “rocky soil” is far too shallow and depleted for anything of value to grow; especially Catholic Social Teaching. Before we can move people to embrace the social mission of the Church, we need to stop relating to them as customers and start relating to them as fellow disciples of Jesus the Christ.

In my next reflection, I will explore a new pastoral/theological movement that holds out the promise of creating “good soil” for the Church of justice and peace to flourish.

Questions:

1. In what ways does your parish follow the logic of the market in the way it functions? How do our parishes resemble any other enterprise operating in the free market?
2. What do you believe is the proper place of the free market in our nation? Do you believe that our parishes are counter weights or enablers of free market domination of all aspects of society?
3. What are the costs to our faith and the quality of our witness to the Gospel as a result of our embrace of a free market approach to parish ministry?
4. How does the free market mentality creep into our own work to promote Catholic Social Teaching in our parishes?

Part Three: In Service to God's Dream for the Cosmos

Opening Prayer:

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Lord of our Gatherings,
today we look out upon churches that are half full
and congregations that are increasingly aged and tired.
We wonder where everyone went;
and we long for the days when our energy was high and our hopes were boundless.

The soil of your church has become rocky and shallow;
and the sun of endless desires and attractive lies have scorched our souls.

Have we been so consumed with bringing people to the Church
that we have forgotten that our call is to bring them to You?
Have we been so intent on giving our parishioners what they want
that we have forgotten that we have been brought together
to serve your purpose and your dream for the cosmos?

Teach us once again to read the signs of the times;
to discover what you are doing in our world.
Give us the courage to move from seeking our own desires
to doing your will and cooperating with your work in the world around us.

Bend our will to your will O God;
bend our hopes and dreams to your hopes and dreams for us.

Thy will be done. Thy will be done. Thy will be done. Amen

Reflection: Parishes in Service to God's Dream for the Cosmos

In the 1990s, a new pastoral/theological movement called Missional Theology began to take shape, primarily in Protestant denominations. The concept of mission has long been part of pastoral theology, but mostly it has focused on evangelical outreach to un-churched regions around the world or it has focused on recruiting the un-churched in the communities surrounding existing churches. But missional theology seeks to re-orientate the entire church culture in the U.S. (One of the seminal books in this

field of study is *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by Darrell Guder.)

In his book, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, Reggie McNeal points out that current church culture in this country is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations that are aging and not being replaced. Unfortunately, this church culture has become confused with biblical Christianity. Some of the faulty assumptions of church culture identified by McNeal include:

- If you build the perfect church (the way we think about church), they will come.
- Growing your church will automatically make a difference in the community.
- The church needs more workers (for church work).
- Church involvement results in discipleship.

As McNeal states, “You can build the perfect church—and they still won’t come. People are not looking for a great church. They don’t wake up every day wondering what church they can make successful.” Many of the un-churched think that church is for church people, not for them. From the outside looking in, it is easy to conclude that the work of congregations is to recruit and form people in order to make them more acceptable to members of the congregation. The invitation to become Christian has become largely an invitation to convert to the Church. McNeal calls this “churchianity” as opposed to Christianity.

Missional theology seeks to re-define church culture by freeing the Church from “churchianity” and its servitude to free market culture. It starts from this profound yet simple declaration: Parishes are called into existence by God to serve God’s purpose. Therefore, the primary purpose of the parish is to serve God’s needs, not parishioners’ needs. We are not a Church that has a mission; we are a mission that has a Church.

This mission is not just the universal mission of the Church to preach the Gospel and baptize all in the name of the triune God. Each parish also has its own unique mission, and the primary work of the parish is to discern that mission and order the life of the parish in service to that mission. (This mission is not the same as a mission statement. Most parish mission statements are meant for market promotion: this is how we plan to do church better.)

In missional theology, the questions parishes need to address are:

- What is God doing in our world and how are we called to cooperate in God’s work?
- What is God calling us to do/be in this place at this time to witness to God’s dream for the cosmos?

In biblical terms, this is called “reading the signs of the times.” As the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* states, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in

their hearts. ... To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel. ... We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.”

The challenge is this: how does a parish “read the signs of the times” and determine its unique calling? How can we work the soil of parish culture to receive the seed of Catholic social teaching and produce a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown? In my next two reflections, I will try to address these challenges.

Questions:

1. Why is the attempt to build the perfect parish not the same as preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you agree with Reggie McNeal that “the invitation to become Christian has become largely an invitation to convert to the Church”?
2. In what ways do our parishes preach “churchianity” as opposed to Christianity?
3. How would most of your fellow parishioners react to the statement that primary purpose of the parish is to serve God’s needs, not their needs?
4. Do you think it is possible to discern God’s unique mission for your parish? Do you think anyone in your parish would be interested in trying to discern God’s call for your parish? Has anyone in your parish ever raised the question of discerning your parish’s unique calling from God?

Part Four: Working the Soil

Opening Prayer:

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

God of Our Planting and Hope for Our Harvest,
You have called our parish into being to serve your purpose
and to produce a crop of justice and peace for all the world.

Bring together all those in our parish who desire
more of what You hope for and less of what has been.
Help us to remember our past with gratitude,
while opening our hearts to something new that You need from us;
at this time and in this place where You have planted us.

We know the journey from our needs to your dreams
is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to unfold.
Give us the courage to leave the familiar and to enter into the wilderness
where there are more questions than answers.

Bring us to your Eucharistic table to be fed and send forth
as a people who see no break between liturgy and service;
no space between the Mass and the call to justice.
Make our prayers of petition a call to conversion;
make our eating and drinking a commitment to feed the hungry and liberate the oppressed.

Send us forth to announce the Gospel of Your Son, Jesus Christ,
in communion with Your Holy Spirit, Amen.

Reflection: Working the Soil

My three previous reflections have been mostly analytical and descriptive of the challenges facing those who want to make Catholic social teaching a constituent part of the life of parishes. The final two reflections seek to be more prescriptive: how do we go about changing the market-driven culture of parish life in the United States?

Because we are dealing with a parish culture that touches almost every aspect of parish life, changing that culture will require a commitment of the entire parish leadership. In addition, changing parish culture cannot be accomplished with a single program or a year-long focus. This work is generational (i.e. we need to think in terms of 20 year timelines.)

When prescribing strategies to combat market-driven parish culture, we are also limited by the weakness inherent in the clerical hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. Unfortunately the key to success or failure is the pastor. Other pastoral ministers, professionals and parish councils can be obstacles or allies, but the pastor is the only person with the power to allow or prevent this work. And even when a pastor is supportive, there is no guarantee that his replacement will be supportive.

Depending on the level of support and/or resistance from the pastor, pastoral staff and parish council, this work can be done in small or large ways. The first step is bringing together allies in the parish who recognize, at some level, that the current way the parish operates isn't working. (There are many good studies about the loss of Gen Xers and Millennial young adults that can be used as resources for this group of allies to study. There are also plenty of studies documenting the decline in church attendance and commitment to the institutional Church. The book, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* by Reggie McNeal, while written for Protestant congregations, speaks to many of the challenges facing Catholic parishes as well.)

Pastorally it is important to create a space for these allies (i.e. Early Adopters) to acknowledge and grieve what has been lost. This pastoral work should not deny the good accomplished in the past; it should create a safe place where people are allowed to acknowledge that something new is needed. While the temptation will be to quickly construct a "solution" to "the problem," what is needed is the courage and grace to embrace the wilderness, where asking the right questions is more important than having the right answers. (A good resource on doing this work is, *Leading Change in the Congregation*, by Gilbert R. Rendle, from the Alban Institute.)

When these Early Adopters are ready to begin the journey out of the wilderness, they can be introduced to the concept of Missional Theology and they can start engaging their fellow parishioners in re-shaping parish culture. The first and most important place to begin is liturgy. The liturgy is, by design, missional in nature—although its missional nature is seldom highlighted or recognized.

One way to recover the missional nature of the liturgy is through the homily. Assuming you can get the cooperation of the presiders, it is possible to lift up the missional aspects of the Eucharistic Prayer and the lectionary readings during the homily. Missional theology does not have to be the theme of every homily, but making at least one reference to the connection between the liturgy and missional theology should be included in almost every homily. If presiders have trouble finding this connection, members of the "Community of Early Adopters" should be ready to assist.

Another part of the liturgy that can help in the formation of a missional theology in the parish is the Prayers of the Faithful. Unfortunately, many Prayers of the Faithful reinforce some of the worst aspects of parish consumer culture. God is often portrayed as the Almighty Vending Machine, dispensing all kinds of goods to his people for the price of a well-written, heartfelt petition. An example of a petition

to the Vending Machine God is: “Dear God, help all those who suffer homelessness to find the shelter and dignity they need.” A parish that embraces a missional theology would pray: “Dear God, may all those who suffer homelessness find in our parish a place of shelter and dignity.”

In addition to the homily and Prayers of the Faithful, it is important to connect the dismissal rite to the parish call to mission. To “go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” is to be a missional people. Inviting parishioners to stop in the narthex after Mass to sign petitions or write advocacy letters should be a regular part of liturgical culture. Giving parishioners an opportunity to sign up to volunteer at a homeless shelter, food pantry or other social service agency should be second nature in the community. In doing so parishioners learn through habit that liturgy is connected to service and justice.

These suggested changes in parish liturgies can help set the table for missional theology to take root but they do not address the central challenge to becoming a missional parish: How can a parish community discern its unique call to cooperate with God’s dream for the cosmos? How can a parish know what God is calling them to do/be? This will be the subject of my last reflection.

Questions:

1. Most professional parish ministers (including priests) are more comfortable helping individual parishioners discern their unique calling or vocation, than with leading the parish community to discern its own calling. Why do you think this is the case?
2. What are some of the potential obstacles to discerning God’s will for your parish? What are some of your fears about trying?
3. Often before people become convinced that a change is needed, a crisis must be recognized. Do you think that the level of concern about the future of your parish is sufficient to create an interest in changing the culture and direction of your parish?
4. In addition to the examples given in this reflection, in what other ways can the Eucharistic Liturgy be a place where missional theology is expressed and practiced?

Part Five: Discerning God's Call for Our Parish

Opening Prayer:

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

God of Our Imaginings; you are both the dream and the dreamer.
You have called our parish into existence to serve your purpose
and fulfill your dream for the cosmos.
And You are our dream for our world made whole by justice
and made plentiful by peace.

But how can we know your will for your people?
How can we conspire with your Holy Spirit at work in the world?
How can we be both the dream and the dreamer?

Give us the insight into the world our parishioners inhabit;
and give us wisdom to understand and interpret this world as you do.

Remind us always that we walk by faith,
not always knowing where we are heading
but always trusting that you will guide us to where you want us to be,
even if we should find ourselves lost with no signposts to guide us.

Strengthen our resolve and commitment to seek your will for our parish in all we do;
so that the soil of our parish might be ready to receive the seed of your dream
and bring forth a crop of justice and peace for the world. Amen.

Reflection: Discerning God's Call for Our Parish

In my previous reflection, I suggested ways that liturgy offers opportunities to move the parish from a market-centered, consumer-based culture to a missional culture. Reflecting missional theology in the liturgy is an important step in changing parish culture but it can only set the table for missional theology to take root in the parish.

Liturgical changes do not address the central challenge to becoming a missional parish: How can a parish community discern its unique call to cooperate with God's dream for the cosmos? How can a parish know what God is calling them to do/be? Discerning a response to these questions is not easy to do nor

is it something a parish only needs to address every 5 to 10 years. Because God's call is both particular (unique to the parish) and provisional (changing over time), the work of discerning God's call will need to be integrated into the ongoing life of the community--it will need to become part of the regular rhythm of parish life.

There are three sources of wisdom that need to be brought into dialogue with each other in order to discern God's call for the parish: the experience of the parish community, the surrounding culture and our religious tradition. All three of these sources need to be put into an assertive relationship of challenge and confirmation. (A good resource for doing this work can be found in the book, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, by James & Evelyn Whitehead.)

The place to begin this work is reflecting on the experience of parishioners. One way to accomplish this is through one-on-one interviews with a representative sampling of parishioners. But instead of asking what they like or do not like about the parish or what they want from the parish (i.e. treating them like customers), the interviews should focus on trying to understand the world parishioners inhabit: What are their deepest concerns for themselves, their family and our world? Where do they find hope in their life and in the world around them? While this information is an important resource for discernment, by its nature it will be anecdotal.

The second source of wisdom that needs to be brought into dialogue with the experience of parishioners is the surrounding culture. This source of wisdom does not refer primarily to popular culture (i.e. fashion, fads and entertainment) but can include it. The culture this discernment process needs to engage is the wisdom available through the social and physical sciences (i.e. sociology, psychology, history, politics, economics, ecology, biology, medicine, physics etc.)

Because this source is ubiquitous and pluriform it is important to allow the experience of parishioners to frame the questions that are brought into dialogue with it. And because the information from the surrounding culture will be more analytical, it may both confirm and contest the anecdotal experiences of parishioners. When accessing the wisdom of the surrounding culture, it is also important to include the experience of those who may not be members of the parish but are important to the universal call of the church--we need to make a preferential option for the poor, the marginalized and disenfranchised.

While the first source of wisdom (the experience of parishioners) is anecdotal and the second source of wisdom (the surrounding culture) is analytical, the third source of wisdom (our religious tradition) is interpretive. Religious tradition includes the Bible and biblical scholarship as well as Catholic teaching, spiritualities, theologies and practices. These sources of wisdom help us to interpret the meaning of experience and culture. Our religious tradition also helps us to sort through the many contesting claims that are made by experience and culture. Finally our religious tradition helps us to prioritize our concerns by reminding us that the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized have a special claim on us.

The outcome of any discernment process to understand God's call for the parish will be partial and incomplete, but this should not lessen the importance of engaging in the process or acting on its results. Understanding God's will for the parish unfolds over time in the same way God's will for an individual

becomes clearer over time. We walk by faith, not always knowing where we are going but always trusting that God will guide our steps if we truly seek to do God's will.

At the point where the parish leadership community feels that they have taken the discernment process as far as they can, they need to formulate missional directives that can be used in creating, implementing and evaluating parish liturgical life, formation programs and pastoral ministry. The language used to express these directives should be missional. For instance, they might begin in this way: "Created by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit our parish is called to ..."

At the same time we need to remind ourselves that Jesus already saved the world through his death and resurrection; therefore it should not be on our parish "to do-list. Understanding the limits of what a parish is capable of doing is important in developing missional directives. Overreach can leave the community dis-spirited and inadequate. On the other hand, directives that do not stretch the community will not be transformative or life-giving.

Discerning God's will for the parish is never complete or fully accurate; it is always a work in progress. We can never be assured of having the right answers, but if we remain committed to the process we can be reasonably assured of asking the right questions.

It is impossible for me to provide ready-made resources, materials or directions on how to do this work. Efforts undertaken in my own parish have had mixed results with little overall impact on parish culture. But I believe that at their best, parishes are laboratories of innovation and practical theology. It could be that some of you who are reading this post will come up with ideas and strategies that will prove to be successful. The more experiments we begin, the better chance of creating successful strategies.

Although I am not very confident in my grasp or practice of missional theology, I am confident of this: as parish consumer culture is replaced by a commitment to missional theology, we can create a rich and fertile soil for Catholic Social Teaching to grow and produce "a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Questions:

1. What do you think are the most challenging aspects of the process of discernment described in this reflection? What would need to happen in your parish before such a discernment process might be possible?
2. Why do you think it is important to start with trying to understand the deepest concerns and hopes of your parishioners? Why would it be a mistake to just stop at that point?
3. Why would it be important to institutionalize the regular practice of discernment in your parish?

4. What would need to happen in your life before you could feel comfortable with trying to promote the ideas in this series of reflections in your parish? What more information do you need? What additional resources would be required?

The Author of this reflection series would be very interested in getting feedback from you in response to the reflection questions for each of the five reflections, especially any response you have to the last question in this final reflection. Please send all responses to Tom Cordaro at cordarotom@gmail.com

** If you have found this small group resource helpful, we ask that you consider making a donation to Pax Christi USA to allow us to keep producing resources like these and cover the costs associated with doing so. Donations to Pax Christi USA can be made on our website, www.paxchristiusa.org, or by mail at the address on the cover page of this resource. Thank you.*