

### **More from the Parish Survey**

As I mentioned, there were many other things that the Parish Survey brought out. I would like to continue to examine them with all of you through the bulletin. And the first and probably most important thing (after all those discussed at Mass) is that many, many of you would like more opportunity to use your own talents and skills for the parish. In fact, 94% of you indicated that you feel it important (to one degree or another) that our parish provide you with the opportunity to help other people. That's amazing! Your generosity and desire to serve are refreshing! Obviously, helping people can mean anything from volunteering with St. Vincent de Paul to putting your skills in financial planning or changing oil at the service of our parish community. The opportunities are literally endless.

The real challenge is coordinating service projects: making sure people know about them, that they're scheduled properly, that they're relevant, etc. In order to do that, what we really need is a Service Coordinator, that is, someone to oversee and organize all service projects. In fact, many Protestant churches have someone who fills this role as a paid member of their staff. While we would love to do that, we do not have funds for such a position. But I don't believe that money (or the lack thereof) can stop us from doing God's work. I am praying that God might put it on the heart of one of you—who has the time and interest—to volunteer for this sort of leadership position. Can you hear that still, small voice speaking to you now? Either way, may God's Will be done. In the meantime, my staff and I will do our best to keep you informed about opportunities to do service in our parish and local community.

### **Noteworthy Comments from the Parish Survey**

Of the 2,000 registered families in our parish, it is true that a little less than 400 people actually participated in the Parish Survey. Of those people, an even smaller portion made specific comments on the survey. Nevertheless, as anyone who has ever been a teacher or been in public relations knows, if one person expresses a thought or question, there is almost certainly a larger number of people with the same thought or question. To that end, I thought I'd just review with the parish some of the most noteworthy comments made in the survey as we continue to think and pray about how to improve our parish in the sight of God. Obviously, all of these comments are anonymous.

Let's start with a perceived area for improvement. One commenter wrote: "I feel left out after I leave church. I signed up to volunteer and nobody contacted me." I feel that this is an important complaint because I have heard it far too often. I would like to make an appeal to all of you who lead or organize our many volunteer groups to take this problem to heart. When someone volunteers to help with one of our parish ministries—everything from sports to the school's PLC to bereavement and homebound ministry—we who lead have a duty to facilitate that, especially if we're the ones who put out a request for volunteers. People volunteer because they feel a call from God to do so. We must never stand in the way of God's call. Perhaps this means we need to be more organized, or perhaps this is an indication to us that we have taken on more than we can handle and we need to share the load. It can be hard to relinquish control once we have it, but we must always remember that the story of IHM Parish is not about what you or I can do, but

what we can do together, as a community. At the very least, common courtesy demands to we call volunteers that we discover we have no immediate use for and explain the situation, rather than leaving them hanging and feeling like no one in the parish even cares about their existence. I am very grateful to our volunteer leaders here at IHM, but I do challenge you to take very seriously your role in enabling your fellow parishioners in following God's call to them to serve. Thank you!

Another commenter made this good and commonly heard suggestion: "Regular after-Mass social opportunities (e.g., coffee and doughnuts) would probably go a long way." I agree, especially if what we are 'going a long way' towards building is community. What better way to make new friends here at church or catch up with old friends than over good food and drink? This is obviously what our Youth Group is trying to do at 6:00 P.M. Mass, and we may try reinstating some 'coffee and doughnut Sundays.' We are also going to try and start some just plain fun programs to help encourage community building. These include Family Movie Night, the first installment of which will be Oct. 11. Also, we are planning a parish Chili Cook-Off in January. I'll be one of the contestants, so you'll have to see if you can beat my mother's recipe for Cincinnati chili! So, we hope you'll make room on your calendar for these parish events. On the other hand, we must remember that throwing doughnuts and chili at the problem of community building—delightful as that may sometimes be—will not fix it. We must each make the choice that parish Masses and events won't just be in and out for what we can get out of it, but that we will spend some time building relationships here at church. It's about deciding that we are family in Christ Jesus.

### **Noteworthy Comments from the Parish Survey**

We continue to reflect on our parish survey for ways to improve in our knowledge and love of God and our service and love of neighbor. This week, we come to my favorite comment of the entire survey: "Tell people to not be afraid to scoot over." Ha ha! So true. And this person, whoever he may be, says it so kindly. Who of us doesn't prefer the end seat of the pew? I always did. But seriously, if we are going to practice a life of Christian love and sacrifice, we really have to begin with the small things. Especially, it does not become us to act rudely or get our feathers ruffled just because someone else wants a seat. We really should scoot into the middle. Or if we need an end seat for health reasons or other important reasons, then we should just politely communicate that and perhaps get up out of our seat to let the newcomers get past us to the middle of the pew. So, let's take up that cross daily and follow after Jesus Christ, right to the middle of the pew—that, my friends, is the joy of Christian love.

Alright, one more. Several people offered some variation of this on the survey: "Earlier Saturday evening Mass." Now, clearly there is nothing wrong with an earlier Saturday evening Mass, as neighbor Mary Queen clearly demonstrates. And I'm not trying to shoot anyone down for an honest answer on the survey. But I would like to take a minute and explain why I don't like "early" Saturday night Masses on principle. The whole reason that we even have Sunday Mass on Saturday evening is from the ancient tradition of keeping a vigil before important celebrations (this is why Saturday night Mass is technically called a "Vigil Mass"). To some

degree, this is tied into the ancient Hebrew method of measuring time, in which a day ended with sunset, and the night was considered the beginning of the next day. But what do we mean by “Vigil Mass”? A vigil is a time of keeping watch, being vigilant, for the Lord. It is a time of longing for true Light and Sun (Son) to rise again and dispell the darkness. The monks especially began these vigils, which they usually kept by rising from sleep in the middle of the night to spend time in prayer—and indeed many contemplative religious orders still do. For all of us non-monks, however, the ideal Vigil Mass is like the Easter Vigil, i.e., it doesn’t begin until the sun is actually setting. Unfortunately, that is very impractical for most of us if it’s more than once a year, and so the Church allows for the regular Sunday Vigil Mass to be celebrated earlier. 4:00 or 5:00 is permissible; sometimes you will even hear of a 3:30 or 3:00 Vigil Mass. But clearly, the later the better if we’re going to stick with the original understanding. So, while some of you would like to have a 4 PM Vigil Mass, I’d really love to have a 7 PM Vigil Mass. I expect we’ll just compromize and leave it at 5 PM. But I hope you understand where I’m coming from when I say I don’t like earlier Vigil Masses. It’s just another example of convenience triumphing over meaning and tradition.

### **Noteworthy Comments from the Parish Survey**

Now, one of the best things about a survey is that people tend to be completely honest because it’s anonymous. And honesty is always the best policy. So, I would like to thank the person who was honest enough to write this: “I would like to see a penance service where you write your sins on paper, burn the slips, and do a group service—not individual or face to face.” And indeed, who wouldn’t rather do it that way? No one, including myself, enjoys facing a priest (even if that ‘facing’ happens behind a screen) and accusing yourself of your sins. And of course, it is an evocative symbol to write your sins on paper and then watch them burn, not unlike the way the love of God will burn away our sins in Purgatory. Besides, I don’t know about you, but I’m a firebug at heart, and I’m always happy when I have a chance to burn anything. So, why don’t we do Confession this way?

Well, the simple answer is because Jesus didn’t ask us to do it that way, and so—as far as the Sacrament is concerned and as far as mortal sins are concerned—it just doesn’t work. Does God want us to be sorry for our sins primarily in our heart? Of course He does. This is why the Church teaches the importance of perfect contition. Perfect contrition means we are sorry for our sins because we have disobeyed our God, Whom we love with all our hearts. This is different from imperfect contrition (or atrition) in which we are sorry for our sins out of fear for the loss of Heaven and eternal punishment in Hell. If we truly have perfect contrition for our sins, the love between God and ourselves wipes away our sins, since as St. Peter says, “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8b). Does that mean that if we have perfect contrition for a mortal sin, we can just skip the Sacrament of Confession? The answer is No, and here’s why.

Jesus specifically gave His Apostles the power to forgive sins. “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you. [...] As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive

the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (Jn. 20:19, 21b-23). Now, it is the ancient faith of the Church that this power was given not simply for the first generation of Christians, but for all Christians throughout time. Therefore, the power to forgive sins is one that was passed on from the Apostles to all the later bishops and priests of the Church. And, if someone has been given the power to either forgive or retain sins, then obviously those who want their sins forgiven must confess their sins aloud. Otherwise, how would the Apostle or bishop or priest know whether to forgive or retain the sin? It was Jesus Himself Who instituted the Sacrament of Confession, requiring us to confess our sins if we are to receive forgiveness. And, among many reasons, there are two big reasons He did this. First, in the Sacrament of Confession, Jesus wants not only to forgive our sins, but also to pour out tons of sacramental grace upon us in order to help us be spiritually healed and to avoid sin in the future. Second, because Jesus—being the Creator of the human person—knows that we need to take ownership of our failings in order to move beyond them. This is just basic mental health; ask any psychologist. It’s not easy, it’s awkward, but it’s very, very good for us. And so, even though Jesus knows our hearts and will forgive our sins if we are perfectly sorry, He still wants us to go to Confession and receive His grace. In fact, as Catholics, we know that part of being perfectly sorry means planning on going to Confession as soon as possible. So, even with perfect contrition, Confession is a must if we are in mortal sin. Confession is also a must if we have not reached the spiritual maturity to have perfect contrition—and indeed, how often can we really say that we are perfectly sorry for our sins based simply on our love of God? In the Sacrament, Jesus makes up for our immaturity and forgives our sins even if we only have imperfect contrition. And so, while there’s nothing wrong with a prayer service where we symbolically burn up our sins on slips of paper, that certainly will not forgive our mortal sins. Since it is not a Sacrament, it cannot replace the Sacrament of Confession.

### **Noteworthy Comments from the Parish Survey: Counterpoints**

As I continue to reflect on our Parish Survey, I have found this interesting counterpoint among the comments. One parishioner (reflecting several different responses) wrote: “I would LOVE for our parish family to dress as though they are going to a special and reverent celebration.” This is obviously nothing new. Many of you in the parish, old and young, believe in the idea of putting on your “Sunday best.” I’m sure that it will come as no surprise that that’s how my mother raised me too (although we used to fight like jackals over it when I was younger) and I certainly celebrate Sunday Masses in this way myself. But now, let’s consider a different perspective. Another parishioner (again, reflecting several) wrote: “More inclusiveness for less affluent parishioners.” While this comment may be intended for other areas of parish life as well, I’d be willing to bet that it’s at least partially directed towards this person’s experience at Mass. Not everyone can afford a fancy suite or dress. And even if most everyone could afford some decently nice clothing from Goodwill or someplace, that may not be high on the priority list for our parishioners who are running ragged every day just to make ends meet. So, here’s the point and counterpoint. Should we dress nicely for Mass each Sunday? Yes, it is a way both of showing our respect to God and also honoring as worthy of respect all the people with whom we

will be going to Mass. But, are there dangers to dressing up for Mass? Yes. There is first of all the danger that we will be doing it for the wrong reasons: to show off, pride, vanity. But also, there is the far more harmful danger that we will begin to look down on fellow parishioners simply because they are not dressed up. If the way we look at someone or interact with someone at Mass causes him to leave Mass feeling inadequate and judged, then we have been an instrument of unholy disruption rather than Holy Communion in the Body of Christ. Of course, it is always possible to judge people in the other direction, deciding that they are pompous and 'un-Christian' simply because they dress up for Sunday, so we must be on the lookout for that snare too. In the end, let us all try to avoid these dangers by being concerned first of all with growing as a parish family during Mass, and especially in caring for the financially poor among us. Then, secondarily—although still importantly—we can also be concerned with dressing nicely.