
The Myth of Maintenance

**“Everything is fine the way it is.
Why change?”**

**“We don’t need new members.
We just need to keep the ones
we already have.”**

**“If too many new people join,
the parish won’t be the same.”**

Statements like the ones above are very familiar in parishes of every religious community. Our world, especially in our modern times, is full of instability and change. We need a solid foundation. People of faith find their foundation in their beliefs and in the worshipping community to which they belong. When people find a parish that speaks to their needs and worldview, it is natural to want to hang on to that community with great zeal. It is equally natural to be anxious about anything which is viewed as potentially destabilizing the firm foundation they experience in the community.

Being a source of spiritual and moral stability is obviously an important ministry for our parishes. However, we have to be very careful that what the parish provides truly is strength for the continued journey, and not a spiritual sedative that simply “takes the edge off” of our daily lives (perhaps one aspect of Karl Marx’s words when he criticized religion as being nothing but an “opiate for the people”). Our strength and stability must help us in the dynamic life in Christ that each of us is called to. The

Church must never be used as an excuse for becoming complacent.

Studies in parish growth show that as a parish grows, it will hit certain plateaus in membership. Counting the average number of people attending Sunday services, the first plateau is at around 80 members. The next plateau is at around 140 members (again, members are defined here as people attending Sunday services). Then a major plateau seems to be 200. The reasons for the resistance to continued growth at these plateaus might be voiced openly, while at other times people put up resistance without even realizing it. When we probe a little into these situations we find that the main concern is that if more people come, things will change.

It is natural to want stability in life, especially in our spiritual life. However, in a parish this stability cannot come through adopting a “maintenance mentality” – that is, putting all efforts exclusively into “keeping things the same”. Maintenance in parish membership is a myth. If our bodies and minds are not exercised regularly, they become weak, get sick and eventually cease to function properly. Likewise, if things stay too static in a congregation, it begins to “atrophy” and die. It may be a slow process for larger communities, but it is bound to happen.

It is very important when speaking of change and growth in a parish to keep in mind what is up for negotiation and what is not in our Church life. Talk about changing the time of a worship service, adding more services to

the schedule (for example, Vespers and Matins on weekends) or what language to use in services are areas that can be delved into by the community. Issues of doctrine, liturgical form and canonical order are beyond the parish’s capacity to discuss.

It is also important to take a balanced approach to making changes in parish life that will make it more appealing to newcomers. Change is necessary, but too much change, too fast, is as detrimental for a parish as no change at all. As in everything, moderation is important.

Sometimes, a parish might want to handle the “change/growth” situation in another way. In some Christian Churches, there is a kind of “limit” placed on parish size. Once a congregation nears this size, a “church planting” team will be established to look into starting a new parish in another area. Parishes that have reached a “comfortable” size may want to look into establishing a mission outreach in another part of the city or a neighboring town.

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Those who are anxious about “losing out” as a result of change brought through parish growth can find strength in these words of our Lord: “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:35) It is precisely when we try to “keep things the same” that we begin losing out.

Whether it is facing the changes necessary for the growth of one’s own parish, or helping start a new parish somewhere else, one thing is certain: every parish has a mandate, from Christ Himself, to bring new people into the Church. Jesus’ final words before His ascension to the right hand of the Father were, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you...”(Matthew 28:19,20) This “Great Commission” is at the core of everything we do as Church. It has to be, therefore, the “prime directive” for every parish.

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Although maintenance may be a myth, the fruits of following this Great Commission have been proven time and again by parishes throughout the world. It is precisely in our willingness to “give it all up” that we find God’s grace opening to help us hold on to that which is dear to us, and to receiving even more than we imagined.

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Success secrets of growing parishes

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