

sense of belonging, Scripture says

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Now, a certain strong and personal independence is a good thing. It keeps us from being simply swept along by the crowd.

But a rugged, isolationist individualism can be destructive. Whether or not we know it, we need each other — desperately.

More and more people are coming to this realization. A gnawing loneliness drives them to seek others with whom they can share hopes or fears. People seek groups and communities where they feel welcome, where they can pray with others, share with others.

More and more Catholics are approaching this problem by becoming part of small groups in their parishes. In these groups they pray or discuss Scripture, especially the Sunday readings. Other times they

share experiences, successes and failures in living a Christian life.

Often participation in such a group leads to a deepened feeling of really belonging to God's family. This can mean that later, during the Mass, people see more clearly that they are not simply worshipping alongside others who happen, for the sake of convenience, to be in the same place at the same time. Rather, they are really together!

The whole community benefits when its people appreciate more fully what Jesus meant when he said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." (Matthew 18:20)

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

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Some want to see the parish focus on service to people with special needs. Some want to find a small group that will study Scripture and pray together. Some want a support group.

One woman told me recently that she wanted her parish to provide activities that interested her, recalling a former parish with a crafts group.

Parents may want the parish to support them in raising their children. Single adults want parish life to address them.

This list could continue and perhaps it should. For church leaders today point out that to feel wanted, people must feel that their special needs are recognized and understood.

But there are some questions to ask here about parishes:

—What can people really contribute to each other when they

possess different needs and expectations?

—Will discussion groups or prayer groups become a source of tension when those in them are not enough alike in interests and expectations?

The same questions could be asked about diversity within the family. What do an 82-year-old grandfather and a 27-year-old adult contribute to each other?

The group of relatives in the beginning of this article play an important role in each other's lives. But they do not always relish each other's differing perspectives on life.

Still, they know each other fairly well. So they can hope to offer each other real support and understanding and care.

And they have spent much time together. They can draw on each other's strengths. Without eliminating their differences, they are able to contribute to each other's growth and happiness.

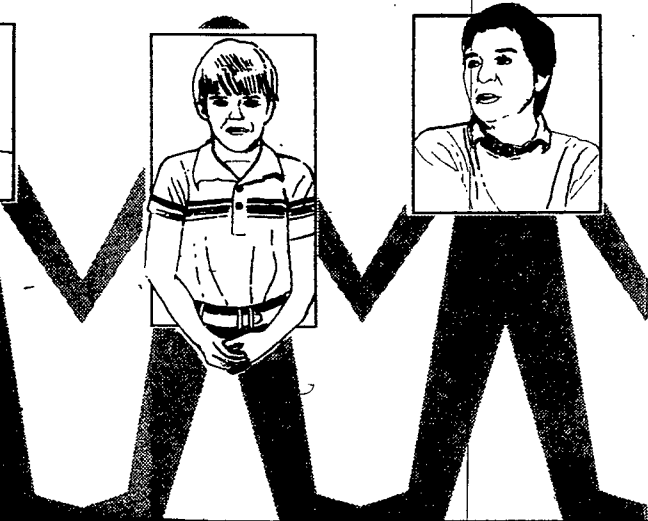
The people of a parish are not just like an extended family. But there are resemblances. Perhaps this is what some leaders have in mind when they organize small groups with relatively different lifestyles and needs.

Perhaps the hope is that if people spend time together it will help. They may learn to see their differences less as grounds for conflict and more as a framework for sharing.

A big challenge facing parish people today is to discover how those who share the same faith, but whose personal needs, concerns and backgrounds differ, can contribute to each other's growth and happiness.

(Gibson is Faith Today's editor.)

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FOOD...

... for thought

In one parish a carefully planned program involving many small groups of adults meeting in homes had just gotten under way. As each small group met for the first time, participants told what they hoped for from their discussions and prayer together.

Some people didn't know what to expect; they were willing to give it a try. A few confessed they were keeping the level of their expectations low so as not to be disappointed.

But in one small group all the participants said they had come in hopes of meeting people. Reports from the many small groups indicated that in virtually every case what some participants expected was the opportunity to get to know others.

Some of these people were new in town. Some hoped to experience again what they had known in a past situation. There were longtime parishioners, couples and single adults who thought there were people in their own Christian community they ought to know and understand better. There were divorced people who felt very alone.

What is interesting is that so many had a reason for wanting

to know people in their parish better.

What needs is this parish program fulfilling? The answer depends on whom you ask.

—It offers members the support and companionship of others who share the same faith and want to live it.

—Again, community members who face similar challenges and problems — adjusting to changed circumstances at home, living far from their closest relatives, etc.

— may offer each other assistance through shared insights and through a sense of caring about each other. If nothing else, they offer each other the sense that they are not alone.

—And such groups may offer people the opportunity to plan and work together to promote a goal outside the group: service to the poor, job counseling for the unemployed.

On a basic level, the groups offer a sense of belonging and being wanted. This is very important to a lot of people today — more people than one might suspect.

Who are the people of the parish? How many need — really need — the opportunity to meet other people there?

... for discussion

1. "A sense of belonging and being wanted." How important is this to you? Do you think it is important to others in your parish?

2. It is suggested above that many people today view parish groups as a place of meeting people. Does this surprise you? Why? Why not?

3. In the article by Katharine Bird, Richard Lawless is interviewed. He speaks of a sense of isolation that many people experience today. Have you ever noted that sense of isolation in people you care about? What causes it? How can Christians respond to such a sense of isolation.

4. "Think of a prayer meeting, and you may well think of a meeting you're never going to attend." Father David O'Rourke begins his article with those words. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever thought that parish prayer groups are just not for people like you?

5. Some of the people Father O'Rourke describes have been hurt in life; they are beyond put-

ting on pretenses in their small group of Christians; they are vivid signs of human need. Yet, Father O'Rourke says, these people are typical of the kinds of people who participate in small parish groups. What is the group's value to them?

Second helpings

"Saints in Due Season: Essays on the Art of Christian Aging," by Thomas McDonnell. This author's thesis is that people need some special saints to rely on during their mature years. The author chooses 10 saints he considers especially suited for older persons, including St. John Vianney, for his ability to listen, and St. Jerome, who understood the pleasures of irascibility. (Our Sunday Visitor Inc., Noll Plaza, Huntington, Ind. 46750. 1983. \$5.95, paperback.)