

The many forms of a love that flourishes

By Monica Clark
NC News Service

"I'd quit if it wasn't for my family. What will they do if I can't find another job? And I'll lose my retirement benefits."

The words flowed with anguish from a middle-aged father of five, a participant in a conference on peace. For 20 years he had worked at a nuclear weapons facility. Now he was experiencing doubts of conscience about that job, wondering whether he should leave it and whether he could leave it without jeopardizing his family's stability.

During a conference break several in the audience gathered to discuss the man's dilemma. Interestingly, their conversation moved from whether he should resign to another question:

What was the responsibility of the Christian community to help him if he did resign?

Here are some of the questions asked: Could parishioners help find the man another job, given the area's higher than average unemployment rate? If the man remained unemployed for an extended period of time, should or would parishioners alter their lifestyles so that he and his family could survive?

Should parish support extend beyond providing adequate food and shelter and include health care or educational opportunities? What about the emotional toll on both the receivers and givers of aid?

situation. But, while he insisted on the equality and unity of the Christians, he did not try to destroy people's individuality.

As a result, a rich mix of people developed, from Lydia, the take-charge businesswoman at Philippi, to Onesimus, the runaway slave from Colossae.

In the second generation, when communities had become even more complex, the author of Titus gave detailed directions for the care of different people in the church: old people, young people, husbands, wives, slaves, masters.

There has always been room for everyone in the church. One with each other in Christ, Christians remain individuals, each with his or her own distinctiveness and dignity.

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

Such questions don't confront most of us too often. We recall the commitments made by parishes to sponsor refugees at the end of the Vietnam War as an example of the community extending itself beyond ordinary works of charity.

But what about real help for someone here at home, perhaps someone whose conscience differs from our own?

I'm reminded of the Scripture read at Mass the Sunday after Easter. The community held goods in common, distributing to each whatever was needed. Are we called to do the same?

In each of our communities, gifts for service abound. Some people offer concrete financial aid, others emotional support. What is important is that love flourishes and continues to grow.

The way of serving others changes and varies from individual to individual. But the underlying value seems constant. A Christian community is called to be a body of men and women so filled with love that they are willing to share.

That can be hard to do. Some will decide to make changes, that are not easy or comfortable.

I think of a neighbor family where two teen-age daughters agreed to share a bedroom so that a Guatemalan couple could stay in their home. And I think of a colleague who lent his car indefinitely to a friend who needed to make daily visits to a son dying of AIDS.

Nor are things easy for people like these who place trust in the promises of others. What happens if the family reconsiders its decision to share house and home, concluding things have become too invasive? Will the bus commuter who shares his car decide that he's becoming too worn down by the hassles of mass transit? What then?

Will others in the community be able and willing to pick up the burden for awhile?

Most people may never confront such dramatic calls to sacrifice. But these examples are a good way for us to reflect on our own reality — the dramatic and not-so-dramatic ways a community's members can support others.

Community means not leaving someone abandoned, whether they are physically ill, emotionally distressed, materially deprived or just in need of a quiet listener or a supportive hug.

(Ms. Clark is on the staff of the Catholic Voice, Oakland Calif.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Not long ago Father Joseph Kenna participated in a Sunday Mass in a community where he wasn't well known. Standing in the congregation "felt a little funny," he said. "I was alone while all the others were with their families."

The experience gave Father Kenna a new understanding of what it feels like to be different from others in a parish. It can lead to a feeling of alienation, he suggested.

To counter that feeling, Father Kenna thinks it is imperative that everyone present a welcoming attitude in church. This is especially so if people are standing alone or appear different from most others in the church.

Sometimes all it takes is a friendly smile or moving closer to a person standing alone, Father Kenna indicated.

Father Kenna is the representative for campus ministry in the U.S. Catholic Conference education department.

Speaking of the diversity among the people of a parish — differences in race, age, expectations, talents, attitudes — Father Kenna said:

"I like the diversity in the Catholic Church — I don't see me echoed all around the room. Diversity is a challenge to my own ideas and feelings and attitudes."

"The church building is the family room of the people of God," the priest stressed. "It's not a place people 'permit' you to come. You should feel as comfortable in church as in your own home."

Another group that can feel ignored in parishes are young adults, Father Kenna said. And making the transition from campus churches to home parishes can pose problems for young adults.

At home "young adults tend to identify being Catholic with being middle-aged and older," Father Kenna observed. "And they will leave a parish if they receive non-verbal and verbal clues saying 'you don't belong here.'"

Father Kenna told a story to bring home a final point.

A priest celebrated Mass one day with a crowd on a college campus and noticed that a woman in the front pew was crying. After Mass, the priest approached her, asking if he could help her.

The woman replied by explaining that she was a visitor to the campus and was happy to see youths taking leadership roles in church.

Her own parish was much older, she added. And seeing so many Catholic youths here "I see there's a future for the church" after all.

SECOND HELPINGS

"Single Catholics — Making Them Feel at Home," by Trudelle Thomas. There are some practical steps parishioners can take to keep single Catholics from feeling excluded by parish life, writes Ms. Thomas, a single woman in Cincinnati, Ohio. "Be energetic in inviting singles into the church," she suggests. For example, watch the language used in church communications — references which can cause single persons to feel excluded; invite single persons to take on leadership roles in the parish; offer single adults the opportunity to organize an education series for the whole congregation; provide opportunities for single persons to connect with others in the church, one to one as well as in groups; make sure that the real needs of single adults are addressed. (Catholic Update, June 1984. St. Anthony Messenger, 1615 Republic St., Cincinnati, Ohio 45210. 25-99 copies, 20 cents each.)

...for discussion

1. Do you think there are members of your parish who do not feel fully welcomed by others because somehow they are different?

2. What can parishioners do to make others — e.g., new members or old members who don't seem to feel "at home" — feel welcome in a parish community?

3. It is important to recognize differences among a parish's people. But it is also important to recognize what is similar among parishioners, what unites them, our article by Cindy Liebhart suggests. Do you agree?

4. Who are the single persons in your parish? What can they offer you?