

Growing in Faith...

When I was a child growing up on Cincinnati's west side in the 1950's and 1960's almost everyone in my neighborhood was Catholic. There were a few families that were "non-Catholic" and to be perfectly honest we often were suspicious and didn't associate with them. As I look back, we lived in a Catholic bubble. Whenever we met someone new the exchange wasn't, "Tell me about yourself. What do you like to do?" Instead, we asked, "What parish are you in?" Depending on their answer we automatically knew where they lived, how their sports teams were doing and generally where they fit in the West Side Catholic community.

All of our social activities were governed by our Catholic ethos—our sports, our Scouts, our get-togethers, and dances were always with other Catholic parishes. I remember our dances always ended with our gathering around the statue of Mary, praying and singing "An Army of Youth bearing the standard of truth..." and "Mother Beloved..." Prom dates had to be Catholic and present their CYO cards and meet us at school to be permitted to escort us. Even our clothing had to be approved. The nuns had to ok our dresses, and had extra material on hand if they needed to be made "more modest."

Beliefs, religious practices and church structure were the same regardless of parish boundaries. The pastor and his associates ran the church were in charge and determined how things should be. Nuns ran the schools. Lay people followed the rules. They could volunteer in the cafeteria or school library, be a coach or Scout leader and work at the annual festival. It was a clearly defined system and we were content and satisfied with our Catholic life though I'm not sure that we ever thought that being church was anything more than what we were experiencing—or that we could ever have an active role in the spiritual side of church life. The grace of Vatican II brought new insights and challenges into our secure world view and it was both scary and exhilarating.

The most dramatic change was that the Mass was now in English with the priest facing the congregation. Instead of a mysterious holy event we witnessed, we now understood what was being said and were participants with the priest in the Mass. We were beginning to see the importance of our role in the church. Lay people began to be readers and Communion distributors at Mass—ministries that previously had been reserved for priests. The Vatican Council also led to the formation of pastoral councils of lay people who advised the pastor about temporal and spiritual matters. It was

the beginning of a new era in Catholic parish life. More than 50 years later, these things seem second-nature but they were astounding for those times. St. Pope John XXIII who called the council said it was time to open the window and let in the fresh air. The Holy Spirit's guidance was all over that meeting.

Vatican II also called the church to be more involved in the life of the community with its documents about the role of the church in the modern world and collaboration with other religions. It was the time of the civil rights movement and the Church urged Catholics to become involved in the fight against prejudice and discrimination. A social justice dimension was added to my understanding of what it meant to be Catholic. I could no longer sit by and not do something. I was called to become informed, speak up, vote, and get involved in issues that affected the unborn, the poor, the immigrant, the imprisoned, the elderly, and the marginalized. In doing this I often find myself working with people from other faith groups in the community. We pray together, we share talents, we collaborate. We struggle together. Sometimes we fail; other times, we make slow progress. We are one in God's love for humanity.

My experience at St. Leo's has further expanded my idea of being Catholic to include the importance of community—of truly being family. In our wonderful diversity we come together from many parts of the world. As we come together in prayer we are one family—truly brothers and sisters in Christ coming together to love and praise God, to love each other and take that love into the world. Our sense of kinship is palpable.

We were able to share this family spirit as the youth group and music ministries presented a Lenten Sunday afternoon of prayer and reflection March 18. The African women's group, one of the Guatemalan music groups, and Bill Tonnis from our covenant partner parish Our Lady of Visitation all played music from their traditions. The youth group gave a reflection and sang a song of praise written by music minister Rick Nohle in English, Spanish, Swahili, and Kirundi. It was a great family celebration!

My vision of church has been expanded and stretched beyond the church I experienced as a child and it invites greater participation and awareness of our role as a family of faith, true brothers and sisters. I can't wait to see what new things God is going to reveal.



In many areas of our lives we trust others who know more than we do. We trust the architect who builds our home, the pharmacist who gives us medicine for healing, the lawyer who defends us in court. We also need someone trustworthy and knowledgeable where God is concerned. Jesus, the Son of God, is the one who makes God known to us.

--Pope Francis

