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Finding what unites the church beyond our disagreements

Fr. Peter Daly | Oct. 22, 2012 Parish Diary

This is my first column for *NCR*, arguably the most liberal Catholic paper in the United States. The priest at a neighboring parish here in southern Maryland writes for *The Wanderer*, arguably the most conservative Catholic paper in the United States. If pushed to talk about the details of ecclesiastical life, we probably disagree on many things. But all in all, we get along. We have to.

We help each other out with confessions in Advent and Lent. Occasionally, we even go to confession to each other. We fill in for the odd funeral when one or the other of us is out of our parish. We see each other at meetings. We share supplies and equipment as needed. We try to be good neighbors.

There is quite literally a river between us. Our parishes are on opposite sides of the Patuxent River here in Maryland. The river is wide and, in some places, fast and deep.

The river is a good metaphor. We are in different ecclesial "camps" on opposite sides of the river. My parish has altar girls; his does not. His parish offers a Latin Mass; mine does not. My side of the river has Communion in both forms every day; his does not. He celebrates Mass with his back to the people; I do not. The differences go on, but we still get along.

In microcosm, our relationship expresses the reality of the larger Catholic church. We are one church with several very different perspectives. Our differences are real, but so is our charity toward one another. At our core, we are still part of the same community of charity and prayer.

In the disputes that surround so many things in our church, it is possible to lose sight of our communality. We recite the same creed, celebrate the same sacraments, read the same scriptures, proclaim the same Jesus Christ and share the same hope. That is important. Too often, our discord drowns out our agreement.

Disputes and disagreements are important, but they are not all there is to parish life. Discussing only our disputes and controversies does not reflect the whole reality of our church.

Our church is not the only one with serious disagreements. In my experience, the Episcopal church, at least in our area, has the same problems.

Once, I suggested to one of the nearby Episcopal rectors that we bring three area churches together for our Lenten stations of the cross: two Episcopal parishes and our Catholic parish. He was fine with getting together with the Catholics, but he drew the line with his fellow Episcopalians. Their divides over ordination, women and gays are the same as ours, but we place a higher value on unity.

I hope I have something worthwhile to offer to the readers of *NCR*. I hope my voice will be an irenic one. Like most priests, I am just trying to hold it all together in the middle of a ministry of interruptions.

After more than 25 years in parish ministry, I have come to realize that it is the ordinary things we do that mean

the most. It is in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy that we really see the value of what we do.

Today, for example, I had set aside time to write this column, but events intervened.

A parishioner died. She was the mother of eight children, a former secretary for Catholic Charities and the mother of a nun. I had to go to the nursing home to pray with the family and be with the grieving husband of 68 years. It was tearful and joyful. But it was also tiring. And the morning was gone.

In the afternoon, I figured to do some writing after I answered phone calls. But I got called out to visit a lady who did not even live in my parish. The hospice chaplain figured I would go, so he called me. I was irritated. Why should I be driving all over the place to minister to someone who lives in another parish? When I got to the house, I realized God wanted me there. The lady was blind. We had a nice conversation, but when I got home, the afternoon was gone.

In between the death in the morning and blind lady in the afternoon, we had other crises to handle. I paid the rent for a parishioner who was in danger of eviction, found a counselor for a young woman who was extremely depressed, and offered to pay for dental work for a poor lady in the parish.

That's parish life. Not much time for reflection.

But I believe that every Catholic, conservative or liberal, is united in those ordinary things of parish ministry. That is what I want to communicate in this Parish Diary.

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