

## **I HOPE THAT THEY NEVER ABOLISH STRUGGLE FROM OUR VOCABULARY**

By: Fr. O'Dell

From time to time, I indulge in the luxury of wondering what it would be like to pastor a parish that has no difficulties. You know, one that is so flush financially that it has enough money in savings to operate for a full year even if all giving dried up tomorrow. A parish that had all of its facilities updated, fully repaired and maintained. A church that had more than enough paid employees to operate the various programs that were provided - and tons of volunteers to provide support services to augment them. In short - a parish community that could take seriously the adage about don't worry - be happy! I wonder if a parish like this really exists and if so - what would it really be like?

After dreaming like this for a while - I always get brought back to reality. There is no such church in existence. There is no parish that is worry free. There is no faith community without its share of troubles and tribulations. Whether we like it or not - dealing with the problems that come our way - having to struggle to make things work - having the occasional "roller coaster" of emotions that accompany times of trial - is just part of life. It certainly is part of faith life as well. There is no such thing as a "struggle free" church family.

I learned a long time ago, that it is in the struggles that we often clarify our identity in the Lord. It is during times of trial and testing that we draw closer together. That when we fight the good fight - we get strong. I learned this in my home parish when I was growing up. I'd like to share a quick picture of this church family with you.

We were a medium size parish that was growing every year. We operated a K-8 Catholic school and attended Mass in the basement of the educational building. Every Sunday there were six Masses to accommodate the crowds. As a parish, we had to struggle for every dollar that we had because so many of our parishioners were young families that were trying to make ends meet. There wasn't ever anything left over for the "frills." But, despite the struggles that went along with our parish - it was incredibly close, amazingly generous and always welcoming - all characteristics of a vibrant and an alive church community.

This spirit of giving was particularly evident every time some special parish event was celebrated. Whether it was the annual Turkey Dinner, the Summer Carnival, the Fall Bazaar, the Winter Festival - everybody attended, and everybody pitched in to make it a success. It was nothing for people to work eight or ten hour shifts to pull these events off. Even though there was never a lot of discretionary money for folks to spend, everyone always managed to pay for their share of raffle tickets, to sell their share of dinner tickets, to buy their share of game tickets - and they did it with a smile on their face. Our goal was to build a new Church - and we were determined to pull it off together. We were going to do it one dollar at a time. It took twenty years - but we finally made it.

Much of that changed though, after the church was built. There wasn't a need to struggle together anymore and as a result, the dinners became less well attended, over time the Summer Carnival dried up, and every year it became more and more difficult to find volunteers to work the Winter Festival. Growing up, I learned that it was in the struggle that our parish had stayed close. That it was in the trials that we had grown. That it was in the hard times that we learned to trust God and pull together. When the struggle was gone - the life seemed to slowly seep out of us.

While it may be nice to want a parish that doesn't have any struggles, be careful what you wish for. When everything is said and done, I'd rather have a parish like ours. One that knows how to struggle together to make things happen. We may never have plenty, but we always have enough. Keep up the good fight and never give up the struggle that keeps us strong.

Have a holy Lent.