

## **DO WE NEED THE CHURCH?**

A number of new diocesan bishops, associated with Pennsylvania, took up their responsibilities last month. As they did so, the face of the Church changed to some degree. It always does when a new spiritual leader takes charge of the Local Church. As an “overseer,” which is what the word “bishop” means, he becomes the one to oversee a proper response to the Lord on the part of the Faithful over whom he has been placed in charge.

That is an awesome task, especially since so many of the Faithful do not understand what the Church is all about. To many, it is simply an organization to which they belong, which should be to their liking, and which they would like to form to their own image of a place where they spend an hour or less per week. However, it is something much more than that. Others, when they find themselves challenged by the teachings of the Church, come to the conclusion that they do not need it in their lives. And, that is far from the truth.

The Lord called those who accept his teachings to be a community of his own. We call it the Church. It has also been referred to as the Assembly of Believers. In any case, we are to be witnesses to those around us of the Good News that He proclaimed by reflecting it in the way that we act and speak, just as He did. In effect, we are travelers together into his Kingdom, helping each other on the way.

Therefore, Christianity was not meant to be a religion of “self” but of “others.” Jesus said as much, when He stated that what we do for and to others we do for and to him. Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ is realized to a great degree through our relationship with others. That is very basic to our religion. As a matter of fact, the word “religion” itself comes from the Latin “religio,” which refers to an association with God. For us Christians, this association takes place in a community. Consequently, the awareness of our need to rely on others and their need to rely on us is basic to our salvation. That is Church.

A diocesan bishop can be very encouraged when he sees the Faithful realize and live that truth. I saw it on the part of many in the merger process of the Cambria City parishes into the one Resurrection Parish. I saw it again recently, during my visit to Camp Zaccheus. While the young campers appeared to be enjoying themselves, integrating their Faith into their everyday lives, it was the young counselors and counselors-in-training that impressed me. Individuals such as Andy, Alex, Mark, and Jim were there giving of themselves, because others had once done the same for them. One of them was giving up as much as half of his vacation in service to the young campers. That is Church.

Yes, we do need the Church. Better put, we are called to be Church. That is who we are. That is our identity. It is not so much that we need the Church as the fact that we need to be authentic to being the Church. The responsibilities of a diocesan bishop focus not so much on directing an organization as on overseeing the progress of the Faithful, as they travel into the Lord’s Kingdom together, while yet on the face of this earth. That earthly pilgrimage of ours is actually a proving ground for life eternal after. If we are together in the Lord here, we will be together in the Lord there. If not here, then not there.

That is a very sobering thought for anyone, including a diocesan bishop!