

Sermon for Sunday 5.8.18

The clergy conference last week was an intense three days of listening and learning.

The keynote speaker, John Roberto, was electrifying and full of energy – as well as well researched ideas and facts.

John held our attention – all two hundred of us - sometimes sitting stunned with our mouths open and always in awe of his presentation.

I said before I left last Sunday that we were going to spend 3 days learning about how to run a parish. Well that is the truth of it – and I think John Roberto successfully opened our eyes and ears to the fact that we now live in the 21st century and that we need to adjust to that reality in the way we do ministry and mission.

He spoke in great detail and listed the different ways, methods and strategies that are essential to faith formation in this digital age when older tried and tested methods of ministry no longer work as well as they once did in previous times.

A man in his late 60's with 40 years' experience in this work, John began by telling us his personal story of his own faith formation as a third generation Italian American Catholic.

His grandmother, he shared with us, was the essence and core of the faith held by his family unit. The family gathered together every Sunday after church for lunch and community. John told us his grandmother never said a word about religion – it was her presence as the centre of the family that was the biggest witness.

She seemed to draw her family members into their faith though her faith filled presence and being.

John drew our attention to the fact that such witness and family faith connectedness, is fast becoming a thing of the past for, in today's world, it is much more common to have generations that have no faith formation at all – no sense of ritual, no habitual attendance or sense of belonging to a faith community – and such a statistic is growing every day.

He assured us that this was not something to be afraid of, but rather something to respond to effectively.

And this was really what his teachings were all about – how to do this – how to adapt to this massive shift in the way people approach living with - and mostly without - any faith understanding at all.

As a thumb nail sketch, John's teachings included ways to create an ecology of faith formation. His teachings impressed upon us that we are to start with what we have in terms of our strengths for it is there that we will find our entry points for expansion.

He stressed that research informs us very clearly that parish growth and expansion is not so much about purchasing programs – and thankfully I have always believed that –but rather about nurturing and providing for families.

It is about forming strategies and forward planning in terms of family faith at home – and in the gathering together in a church centre – wherever and whatever that may be.

By families, John means all members - all ages - intergenerational – grandparents, parents, aunt's, uncle's, children and grandchildren.

He shared with us that he was sick of hearing pastors and priests complaining that they had only old parishioners.

He often replied to such complaints, "What's wrong with that – if you didn't have them you wouldn't have anyone."

Grandparents, aunts and uncles teach younger ones faith habits. They are very helpful and they are here. He said.

He stressed that it is important to be intentional about what we do together intergeneration-ally as a parish. Using 21st century digital strategies is a key method- such as on line teachings particularly in ministries as baptism before and after, confirmations, weddings - during Lent, Advent, and other liturgical seasons.

Having a monthly theme on line for all to read and engage with. Such as the Way of prayer, the Way of forgiveness and What the Sacraments are in everyday life - to name a few.

He gave us ideas about web sites that reach beyond the parish faithful and out into the community and how to connect with resources that are readily available and that will enhance what we already do in parish life.

He talked about how important it is to look at the whole picture, to plan ahead 3 years into the future and then take one step at a time developing growth as we go.

As I listened to his presentation day after day – I couldn't help but notice how John's teachings fitted with the message of the gospel readings last week and this week.

Last week we heard about the feeding of the 5000 by Jesus. Jesus used what he had to work with – a few fish and loaves of bread.

These were his entry point to the miraculous feeding of all who needed feeding and with such abundance that there were baskets of left overs.

And how Jesus accompanied his disciples who were afraid and alone out in the stormy seas of the lake, through impossible means that defied the laws of nature - by walking on the water to be with them – to accompany them.

Today's gospel passage continues on from last week's, when Jesus urges his followers on beyond their traditional perspective and into deeper faith that is embodied in him.

He puts before them the true reason they follow him. "You are here because your tummies are full, because your physical needs are met – you are not here because you saw signs of God in your midst."

The crowd then challenge Jesus by alluding to the manna that Moses provided for their ancestors in the desert. Jesus response is precise and insistent: it wasn't Moses that provided for you, it was my Father; and it is not that he **gave** but that he **gives** the true bread from heaven. It is not past tense – it is happening now.

The **true bread** is the "bread from God"; the one who comes to give life to the world **is** that very bread. " I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Jesus calls them to look differently at their tradition. To shift their focus and view it through him. He calls them into a spiritual maturity and what that means is -

He call them to trust him - as the one who will feed and accompany them at all times, in all places and in all circumstances.

I believe that we too as church are being called to trust in him totally. We too, are being called to shift our focus that will enable a broader vision that encourages different methods and strategies that will meet the needs of all generations to come to know Christ as the bread of life in their lives.

Thankfully in our parish we are already taking such steps.

Our new web site is still being developed and certainly this past conference has come at the right time for the web sites' final development will include on line access to pastoral care and teaching for all the community.

We also seek to have among our ministry team a part time youth worker whom we envisage will enhance what we already do here at Grovely.

First steps first however– let us now pray together as one body of Christ – proclaiming our trust in him as the one who feeds and accompanies us in all time and place, as we seek his leading to broaden our vision and mission in our parish life.

Let us pray.

We trust you Lord – We trust that you feed us and accompany us. Lead us in your ways of movement that provides for all your people and creation in love, care and nurture.

The Lord be with you.