

January 8th, 2020

What would I say to another priest who asks about the Pioneers Retreat?

My parish was stuck in a rut; specifically, I was stuck in a rut. Too many people reported directly to me about different ministries, and I became the "bottleneck" point at which things got stuck. Also, our 25-year-old parish had become accustomed to doing things without thinking about why we do them. We never thought about what we *should* be doing, but only considered what had been done in the past and tried to plug gaps with personnel based on our past experiences. I wanted a reset. I wanted to shake things up. I wanted to get myself out of the rut, and get the parish out of its "mindless ministry" approach. I wanted people to consider what we *should* be doing, or even what we *want* to be doing, almost as if we were starting a brand new parish.

When I shared this with Dn. Adam Roberts, he told me I needed the Pioneers Retreat. As most priests know, it is difficult to spin the flywheel in a different direction all by yourself. I needed help from the outside, someone to come in and tell the parish, "You can do things differently and better, and you can grow personally from the struggle to change." That is just what the Pioneers Retreat did. There were no promises of a new mission statement for the parish, or some new direction. It was advertised as "If we want the core to grow, how do we do that?" So the core came, and the core saw its shortcomings. Then the core decided that it wants to try shaking things up because they realized we were stuck.

The Pioneers Retreat requires much humility and honesty. It will be painful for the priest because if there are problems organizationally, administratively, or in the leadership then the priest bears the responsibility and burden for it. Some people might try to take cheap shots at you or blame you for the problems. Regardless of the validity of such complaints or accusations, the easy answer is "I am a good enough leader to bring in help when we need it. We need it now, so let's get to work together." Once people understand that the Pioneers Retreat is an opportunity to grow spiritually, numerically, and financially, then they'll be on board.

The Pioneers Retreat is not a self-help, business revitalization consultation process because it doesn't actually require anything of the "group" at the end of it. Instead, it puts the responsibility to carry out the new parish vision on each individual. "If you want your parish to have X or be like Y, then set goals for yourself to start moving in that direction." People are accountable to each other but can't say "It's someone else's responsibility." The tremendous opportunity for *personal* spiritual growth that comes from this retreat actually surprised me.

For my parish, we all agreed we wanted to have a friendlier, more hospitable atmosphere in the parish, especially toward guests and members "on the bubble" who don't come around very often. People set their own goals to talk to new people and get out of their comfort zone more regularly. One month after the retreat ended, I can say with confidence that the group-wide concern/consideration for others outside their cliques has increased and is very much at the forefront of the retreat attendees' efforts on Sunday mornings. Each person--even the priest--is trying harder to smile more,

to engage more, and to venture outside of their comfort zone to be more welcoming and friendly. One of our founding members said during her house blessing, "Our church is definitely more friendly than it used to be." But that's only a half-truth because the "church" isn't more friendly *per se*, but the individuals are actually making more of an effort to be more friendly.

Organizationally, we are shaking things up. We are reorganizing our ministry teams, and are making efforts to be more intentional about how we deploy our time, talents, and treasures as a parish. We are asking questions like "Why do we want a festival?" instead of "Who's going to run the festival? Nobody is volunteering!" Such results of the Pioneers Retreat are ultimately pointing us back to the Mission Statement handed down by our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 28: "Go forth to all nations..."

Having an outsider ask the right questions enabled me to follow up with insights about our parish or parishioners that would not have been well-received on their own. I would recommend the Pioneers Retreat to every mission starting out, and to every parish at least once every 10 years. It is easy to lose focus on our purpose and mission when there is so much work to do right in front of our eyes, and it is common to slip into a rut. But taking the time to ensure that we are doing the right kind of work with the right people is well worth the effort.

The Pioneers Retreat in my parish only ended a month ago, but the results are already starting to show. We have a long way to go, but by God's grace, the flywheel has begun to spin in a new direction.

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