

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 4, 2011

As a priest and psychologist, I'm always interested in what priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley has to say about the Catholic Church. He likes to point out the faults of his sisters and brothers (particularly priests) in the church. He criticizes us for dull liturgies and irrelevant homilies. At some point in his life, he must have read today's gospel from Matthew and decided that it was the most important gospel passage in the entire Bible. He uses as his witnesses his empirical data to back up his arguments and set things right, once and for all.

For fun reading the other day, I picked up his old book about the church's problems and his solutions to them. The book is *The Catholic Myth: The behavior and beliefs of American Catholics*. It seeks to torpedo a lot of assumptions people have about Catholics. For example, Greeley writes: "As for the pope, the Vatican, the United States bishops, your own bishop and his chancery, they simply don't matter in your ordinary religious life."

He adds: "I intend no disrespect to the Vatican or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops or the diocesan curia or the officials in power in these institutions." (Now, remember, I was Vicar for Clergy for 16 years). Greeley continues: "I merely wish to assert that the parish and the home are where the religious action is... The most important religious influences are local – the religious behavior of your spouse and the quality of preaching by your priest."

Andrew Greeley can be faulted for his naughty tongue, but his mischievous style doesn't diminish his insights into human behavior. I believe he's on target when he says that "the parish and the home are where the religious action is." You would never grasp this fact by reading the religion sections of national magazines or watching TV. Stories there are all about the big shots in the church, the pope, Archbishop Dolan of New York, and so forth. We read about theological debates and excommunications and more and more these days, about the scandalous behavior of those who lead the church.

We need an Andrew Greeley to remind us that those stories really don't present the whole picture. The church continues to struggle, to minister, to heal and help in families and parishes around the world. We need an Andrew Greeley to remind us that it is in parishes like Christ Our Hope that there is no sign of "loss of faith." A third of parishioners across the country volunteer in some sort of ministry. Twenty-five percent pray more than once a day, fifty percent at least once a day; ninety percent pray at least several times a week. Greeley points out that Catholics still have a healthy spiritual life.

Two weeks ago we heard from St. Matthew about Jesus giving Peter the important charge of the keys of the kingdom, with power "to bind and loose." It was the kind of story one would read in the religious section of our newspapers and hear on TV. It was a story told with a view from the top of the church. But today's gospel from Matthew is told from below. It's about the local church, the kind of story Greeley believes is most important. The power to declare things "bound and loosed" is given not just to the rock, but to all of us who make up the church.

Today's gospel is about ordinary folk in the early church struggling to get along, especially with sisters and brothers who were less than perfect. It's a story about how the early church, even when it was small in number, two or three gathered in the Lord's name, was the kingdom of God on earth. The church is not only bishops excommunicating weak members, but husbands and wives, mothers and fathers and kids, people and priests quietly helping one another, setting one another loose, especially in moments of trial and error. The church is not only the Sunday eucharist, but the table prayers of your family. The church is not only the church in Rome or the Archdiocese of Seattle, but this one-year old downtown parish community.

Of course, we live in a far more complicated time than when Father Peyton said, "The family that prays together stays together." Today's lifestyles bring new stresses on people to gather as church. In three-quarters of our families, both parents work. The beginning of a new school year brings tough demands of schedule juggling. The most important instruction from parents to children is, "Hurry!" The prophet Ezekiel of our day might point out that day care is raising the kids, McDonald's is feeding them, video games and iPods are entertaining them.

Today's gospel portrait of a small group of people praying and gently correcting one another is a gentle reminder that whenever we are gathered in our homes, our parish, our community, no matter how small we are, no matter how weak we are, no matter how hectic our schedules are, we are the church and so we are Christ Our Hope to one another.

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