

10-3-07 - Catholic Church more than just a parish presence
JOHN D. BURZYNSKI, Opinion, South Bend Tribune (IN)

"...We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

In professing our Nicene Creed as Roman Catholics every Sunday at Mass, we as Catholics profess to belong to "one holy catholic and apostolic Church." This line from our creed is not simply a profession of belonging to a single unique parish, and certainly is not a profession to follow our bishops' decisions (on parish mergers or other matters) only when it is convenient to do so. These professed words refer to a belief in one, true and universal church, a church in the broadest sense of the word, with a leadership that is grounded in an apostolic succession from St. Peter and thus from Jesus Christ.

The beliefs of many Sacred Heart of Jesus parishioners in Lakeville detailed and quoted in the article "Challenging the bishop" (Tribune, Sept. 9) are beliefs that are in direct opposition to the very creed that these Catholics profess every Sunday at Mass. Some of the quotes from the article seem to be knee-jerk emotional reactions and responses designed to inflame the Catholic Church hierarchy and create further division, or possibly even a schism, between Sacred Heart and the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend.

It certainly seemed as if the article was quite slanted and sympathetic towards Sacred Heart's "plight" as a parish possibly being closed and merged. At the same time the article did not fully explain the Catholic Church's position or beliefs on parish mergers in a positive light. Religiously, Catholics experience the very center of religious life through Sunday Mass and a day-to-day involvement in parish life. As a Catholic parishioner at St. Jude Catholic Church, I empathize with the parishioners at Sacred Heart, and I fully understand having an emotional and religious attachment to one's parish. Many Catholic parishioners have strong historical ties to their parish. Attachments to parishes where one's children were baptized, or an attachment to a parish where a husband and wife were married are deep and strong ties. Often times, these same Catholic parishioners have a further attachment to a parish that they helped build or renovate. Numerous celebrated Christmases, holy days, sacraments and summer festivals further deepen and strengthen parish ties and attachments.

I am sure that if the roles were reversed and St. Jude was being closed and merged with another parish, I would not be happy for many of the same reasons. I would nevertheless still attend Mass and participate equally and strongly in parish life at my new parish because I am Catholic first, not first a parishioner at St. Jude. My primary identity is as a Catholic, not as a specific member of a parish.

While buildings and parish locations are certainly an important Catholic symbol and identity of parish life, buildings in and of themselves are not the essence of a parish or of Catholicism. It is the congregation, the people, the body of Christ and the faith that should bind a parish both to itself and, more importantly, to the Catholic Church. I would like to think that, God forbid, should the parish that I attend burn to the ground tonight,

tomorrow our parish would receive support from the Catholic Church at large, and that our parish would remain unified regardless of what location or building we would temporarily choose for worship.

What The Tribune article failed to adequately point out is that within the Catholic Church we, as Catholics, profess a belief that we are one body of Christ and one Catholic Church, not a bunch of separate Catholic parishes that happen to identify themselves as "the Catholic Church" only when it is convenient to do so. The strength and unity of faith within the Catholic Church is the foundation that often differentiates Catholicism from the rest of the Christian churches. This strength and unity in faith, both in universal Catholic belief and practice and in parishes as well as in one Catholic body is, by non-Catholics, an often misunderstood religious principle.

Our Catholic apostolic belief as expressed in our creed is grounded in the belief that the present day bishops receive their authority from an apostolic lineage dating back to St. Peter (and thus Jesus Christ). The Catholic Church is different from other churches because we as Catholics follow (as a flock) our bishops (our shepherds) and respect their decisions. This is not to suggest a blind obedience, and while we may ask questions as to "why?" or want an explanation on an issue, ultimately we are still bound as Catholics to accept our bishops' decisions and teachings. This is one of the foundations of belief within the Catholic Church. No bishop wants to make the decision to close or merge one parish with another. The pain and hurt often associated with such decisions divides, both in the short- and the long-term, the Catholic community. Due to a shortage of priests and other factors such as population shifts and ease of travel, a "parish on every corner" is no longer a viable alternative in most Catholic dioceses. This parish merger situation will only become worse if the number of priests continues to dwindle.

I would suggest to the parishioners at Sacred Heart that if and when the day comes that their parish is closed and merged with St. Jude, we will both welcome each other into our new parish as one, unified in the Catholic faith and unified in parish life. In the interim, an open and faithful dialogue with our bishop, a belief in accordance with the creed that is professed every Sunday, rather than a system of petty protests and threats aimed at the church and our bishop, is the way to stay unified, both as a parish and as a member of the Catholic body as a whole. Sacred Heart is indeed a unique parish, and a valued member of the Catholic Church.

John D. Burzynski lives in South Bend.