

Parish Church
15th Sunday of Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 6:7-13)

This weekend we undertake a parish re-registration to update our records in the office, which are very outdated and inaccurate. Since the time of the Bible, it has been a practice to take a census of the People of God. For instance, the book of Numbers is so named from the first census Moses took of the people while in the desert at Mt. Sinai (Nm 1). Likewise, when Jesus performed the multiplication of loaves for the large crowd (Mk 6:30-44), he had the apostles organize the people into groups which were counted (Mk 6:40). This represents the way the future Church would be organized into local parish units and nourished by Christ in the Eucharist, under the supervision of apostles. Today as then, the counting is by household, since they numbered the “men, not including women and children” (Mt 14:21, Mk 6:44). Thus we too need to number our households again, that we might more effectively serve the sacramental needs of parishioners, including the sacramental preparation of children, and the pastoral care of the homebound.

In today’s Gospel Jesus is training the apostles for their future work in the Church, sending them out to nearby towns and villages with his authority to cast out demons, preach repentance, and heal the sick. These instructions have served the Church for 2000 years, as her apostles have continued to go into every town and village of the world.

First, he tells the apostles not to bring anything extraneous with them, especially money. What the apostle needs to bring with him is within him; it is his training, knowledge, faith, and ordination. Priests and religious are prepared to serve the church in the various towns and villages by the spiritual formation and education they receive in the seminary or religious institute. “Apostle” means “sent.” The apostles are sent by Christ through the Church, into every town and village, to carry out the work of the Gospel: preaching, casting out demons, anointing the sick; i.e., celebrating Mass and the Sacraments.

Second, Jesus tells the apostles to find worthy people and stay in their home. The apostles will bring the Gospel, and the local church will provide the hospitality. It will be the responsibility of the members of the local community to provide for the work of the Church from their resources, and this is precisely what a *parish* is in the Catholic Church (as opposed to a mission, station, chapel, shrine, etc.). It is a community of the faithful that has the stability and resources to provide for the work of the church in a long-term way, and is erected canonically for this purpose. The parish “hosts” the apostle, and the apostolic work.

In the early Church, and especially during the Roman persecutions, the parish church literally was someone's home. Often times, the man who offered his house would end up being appointed/ordained by the apostle to be the local leader (episcopos – “overseer”) of the church in that city (cf. Tit 1:5).

Two famous examples of homes that became early parishes are the “Upper Room” in Jerusalem, and the home of St. Clement in Rome. The “Upper Room” is the family home of St. John Mark, whose mother is called Mary (Acts 12:12), who wrote the second Gospel. As is evident from the Acts of the Apostles (1:13-15, 12:12,) and historical record,¹ it became the first “parish” in the Catholic Church, and continued to serve as such until destroyed by the Persian invasion of 614.

St. Clement lived in Rome just a few blocks from the Coliseum, at the time of the Apostles. He is mentioned in the new testament (Phi 4:3), and he himself became the third “episcopos” (bishop) in Rome after St. Peter, in the years 88-97. He is our fourth pope. His home became one of the very early parishes in the city of Rome, and is still an active and important church in Rome today, though it has been rebuilt and expanded several times in 2000 years. In the crypt of the present church there is an archeological tour that will show the visitor portions of the earlier churches, as well as remains of Clement's original house, and other buildings from the original street level of 2000 years ago.

The era of “home churches” ended in the fourth century when the persecutions ceased and Christians could now worship in public, building great basilicas. Thus what began as people originally giving their own homes for the work of the church, evolved into the present day situation where people combine their resources and build “God's house” where the work of the Church can be accomplished effectively for a large community. It is in this house that the apostles (pastors) continue to receive the hospitality of the local community, while the local community feels fully “at home” in their parish church, which they provide, and for which they are responsible. The parish church continues to be a “house,” the house of God, the true home of the Christian faithful who are members of God's household.

Catholics love their parish churches, which they often build with their own hands.² I am always touched by the example of the original Polish immigrants to Texas, who settled near San Antonio in the 1840s. While living in the open and in tents, they immediately constructed their parish church. Only then did they begin building their own homes.

¹ An inscription from the 6th century reads: “*This is the house of Mary, mother of John, called Mark. Proclaimed a church by the holy apostles under the name of the Virgin Mary, mother of God, after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven. Renewed after the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in the year A.D. 73.*”

² Excepting the many ugly aberrations of the past few decades that have unfortunately been foisted on the faithful.

To be a “parishioner” means to be among the worthy individuals in a city who are ready to make of their own homes the church, and of the church their own home. It means taking an active part in the stewardship of the parish, ensuring that the apostolic work of the Church is properly provided for. It means practicing hospitality, above all to the Word of God that comes through the preaching and Sacraments of the Church.

As we renew our parish census, let us faithfully take up our part in the long tradition of the Church, so that like San Clemente in Rome, or the Upper Room itself, we might endure in this town, God willing, until the second coming.