

Taking Back Our Church

The long letter from the irate congregational member complaining about some of the recent changes in the congregation's worship ended with these words: "It's time for us to take back our church!"

Take Back? Our? Church? I understand that such a statement finds its energy in a person feeling powerless or on the outside. Often this type of statement is made by a person who feels they have done their service in the past by serving on council or doing committee work, but no longer wants to serve in those areas. Potentially, there are all sorts of psychological dynamics behind such a statement. I personally have witnessed that the people in a congregation who are so negatively vocal are often the ones who are in crisis in their own personal lives and their homes are in turmoil.

But there is something askew even deeper than personal psychological issues in the statement, "It's time to take back our church!" It begins with our understanding of church. St. Paul tells us that the church is the Body of Christ. In Baptism we each become members of that one body. The congregation is not the Body of Christ. It, too, is only a collective member. As in Paul's day, there is a constant struggle in the local congregation to maintain a sense of connectedness with the whole Body of Christ. We know our context, our congregation. We tend to be unaware of what we are doing collectively as the church around the world in mission and service. We don't see the whole picture; we don't see how the relationship with other congregations and ministries around the world is mutual. We indeed become like the hand that says to the foot, "Since you are not like me I have no need of you." The body, even the Body of Christ, needs diversity of thought, diversity of function, diversity of perspective, diversity of experience, and diversity of response.

In part, this narrow view reflected in the words "take back our church" has to do with the possessive pronoun, "our." Whose church? Whose Body? The congregation is not a local lodge or country club. We do not pay to keep it going. We do not have ownership in it because our

great grandfather put the cross upon the steeple. It is not our church because the pastor makes us comfortable with the sermon message. Nor is it not our church because practices change and sermons cause us to confront our comfortable attitudes and behaviors. I believe that it is God who births each congregation and blesses it for mission and service. We support the congregation and the ministry of the whole Church out of gratitude for all that God has done and continues to do for us. I invite you to read anew Jesus' parable found in Matthew 21: 33-46. Whose Church is it?

And finally, "Taking back..." ..This sounds like whichever political group is not in power. The Church, like love, as an expression of God's love, cannot be held, cannot be taken back. It can only be given away. How and what are the members of each congregation doing to give away the church? Giving it to the next generation, giving it to the next ethnic wave of immigrants, giving to those in need in our community. It is not about taking anything back; it's about trusting God and opening our eyes to see in what we are to be engaged for service and mission as a member of the one Body of Christ.

Happy Easter! Joyous Resurrection !