

When I was in graduate school in Baltimore back in the late 1980s I attended the new Cathedral in Roland Park. I was a regular at the early mass on Sunday morning. I sat right up front. After a year or more the Pastor, Monsignor Armstrong, noticed me and asked to have a talk with me. We made an appointment, and when I went to see him, I was looking forward to it because I had decided to apply to study for the priesthood for the Archdiocese of Baltimore (wouldn't he be pleased and surprised?)

Well, when Monsignor Armstrong began our conversation, his agenda was finding someone to lector at the early mass. Would I be willing to do it? So, you know what I said? "Actually, Monsignor, what I really want to do is enter the seminary. But I don't think I want to be a lector." I still laugh at the gall of my response. So, I want to be a priest, but I can't take the time to lector at my own parish! But looking back I now see that my idea of being a priest was very abstract. But I had never done any real ministry in the Church at all! In fact, the thought was very intimidating. It was such a huge step for me to see myself getting out of my pew and serving others that I could hardly conceive of making it.

"When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.'" Today I want to preach about the stewardship of our talents, that is, serving God, in our own faith lives and in the Church. We have begun another year of programs and activity at Sacred Heart. Make this the year your own spiritual life moves into a deeper place.

I want to divide that spiritual journey into three phases. The first phase is simply believing and showing up. How many of us are at that place! We may not be that motivated. We may not understand much about what we're doing here. But we have a sense of needing God – and we show up most of the time -- or at least sometimes. I was pretty good at this after I came back to the Church.

The next phase is a new sense of discipleship. Jesus becomes more real. I'm interested in growing in Him and knowing more. I pray more than just the bare minimum. In this phase I become interested in how I can grow closer to God. I take the initiative. I begin to make use of the offerings of the faith. Maybe it's joining a Bible Study, or Eucharistic adoration. I come to listen to a speaker at the parish, etc. I was also all about this during my time in Baltimore. I spent hours and hours reading about the faith. I started to pray regularly.

But this new energy is still centered on myself. A huge divide in our life in Christ comes when we move into the next stage, from being served by the Church – to becoming a servant for others in their own spiritual journeys. Here let's go back to the Gospel. Jesus is not saying today that He wants to boss us around. But He is saying that serving is an extra in His Kingdom. It's an expectation, because that is the way we help others grow in Christ – and how we grow ourselves.

This was the step I had a hard time taking during those graduate student years (and in that conversation with Monsignor Armstrong). It was still all about me and my own journey. But serving others is necessary to becoming the saints Jesus created us to be.

And that brings me to our need for more servants here at Sacred Heart. Again, there is a great chasm between the large majority of Catholics who only relate to Jesus and the Church as those who are seeking to receive for themselves – and that minority who are also looking to give back to others. If you are not doing anything but coming to mass, please take that small/huge step of doing . . . anything else.

Every Catholic needs to serve in some way. For example: You could volunteer to be an usher – or as a hospitality minister (we're organizing that new role). They will greet people coming into the church. It isn't difficult, but it's important. How many people sadly come to a Catholic church and are never spoken to at all – by anyone? A smile and "Good Morning!" go a long way.

Or you could volunteer to be a lector. In this ministry you get to feed the people with the Word of God. Or there are the Eucharistic Ministers – they literally feed the congregation with the Body of Christ. And, of course, altar servers, who are servants of the liturgy and all of us – not just the priests.

Outside of the mass there are also ways to serve. We are beginning the coffee and doughnut ministry again. Starting today this will happen on the first and third Sundays of the month after the Sunday morning masses. We need more people to volunteer for that service. This gathering is so important. (By the way, try and stop by for a bit after mass. Catholics need community with one another). We also need more videographers to live-stream the mass. After mass there will be sign-up table in the narthex where you can learn more. Please take that next step in your spiritual life.

Monsignor Armstrong was very understanding about my refusal to serve the parish as lector. No snarky comments, and he did help me get started in

applying for the seminary (although I later decided to apply for Seattle). But looking back at myself now – I understand why I declined to serve (it was just too weird to think of myself up there or out there). But I also see now what an opportunity I missed to build up my own faith and budding vocation as a priest.

Volunteering to serve at the parish might seem intimidating – or a big commitment. But it is the way to grow in Christ. We can only get so close to Jesus if we won't serve Him in those in need. If we want to grow in Christ we must serve others for Him – or, rather, serve Jesus in others.