

Reflections

by the
Most Reverend Thomas J. Murphy



The Connection of the Local Parish to the National and Universal Church

A person need only to spend a short time in Montana to become aware of the great pride which people have in our state and in our local communities. That pride is rooted in a strong sense of identity which has a rich tradition in the history of our land. People in Montana relish the beauty of nature, the unending panorama of plains and mountains, and the big sky. People of Montana have a friendliness which is infectious and an honesty and concern for one another which is refreshing and wholesome. There is a real sense of belonging on the part of people of Montana.

If this is true in our existence as human beings within a State, it should be even more true in our experience as members of a Church. Our own Roman Catholic faith offers us a rich tradition and a great legacy. As members of the Catholic Church today, I really believe we have to develop an even stronger sense of pride in who we are and what we believe. There should be a real appreciation for the beauty of our faith and our traditions and we should do everything possible to preserve them. The relationships we have to one another should be stronger than the ties that bind us together as members of a civil community because the basis of our relationship is the Lord himself. That relationship should in turn prompt a concern for all the members of the Church community throughout the world.

Since Vatican II, there has been a great effort to develop the identity of the local parish community. This is most important, but the identity of the local parish community only makes sense in the relationship it has to a broader and wider understanding and appreciation of the Church. No local parish community is able to have an identity exclusively on its own. It must have a relationship to the neighboring parishes and to a diocese which in turn relates to the national and international presence of the Church in which we live.

What does all this mean on a practical level? Our vision of responsibility as a Roman Catholic faith community must prompt us to see these realities in other parts of the diocese and the world. A person, whether a member of the clergy or the laity, is not allowed the luxury today of being an island unto himself or herself. Our vision as Roman Catholics must be broader and more expansive to include the Christian world community. To do or act otherwise is to fail to live up to the identity which is ours.

Likewise, when a parish community gathers together in faith and worship, this faith and worship is not exercised in a vacuum. A pastor and a parish must see beyond the local parish boundaries to its union with a Church universal. When faith is professed or liturgy celebrated, it is not just the faith or liturgy of the local community, but a celebration of faith and worship of a total Church. That is why it is so important to have a creed of faith and even liturgical laws which govern our celebrations. The adherence to that creed and the observance of these laws manifest the unity which should be ours as a Church existing in a world beyond our own parish.

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The above thoughts on our awareness of ourselves as a community in a diocese result from my own travels these past two weekends throughout the diocese. During the last weekend in October, I joined the Religious Women of our diocese for a gathering in Lewistown. Later that same day, I celebrated the Eucharist with the people of Stockett. That was followed by my participation in a citywide prayer meeting at St. Luke's in Great Falls. On Sunday, I joined the communities of Sand Coulee and Eden for mass and both communities joined Stockett for an afternoon potluck dinner. A quick visit to St. Gerard's in Great Falls brought Sunday afternoon to a close. This past week, I celebrated the liturgy on All Saint's Day with the people of Glendive and drove on to visit the Benedictine Abbey in North Dakota. A celebration of All Soul's Day took place in Plentywood after a brief visit to Sidney. Another brief visit to Glentana was followed by a weekend in Glasgow to celebrate and preach at the weekend Masses.

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As Bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Montana, it is obvious to me that the faith of our parish communities is strong and vibrant. But this strength and vitality makes sense in the identity we have not only as local parish communities, but as members of the Church universal. That is what gives us identity as Roman Catholics. And it is a great privilege for me to be the pastor of the Catholic community of Eastern Montana because of the faith we share, profess and celebrate.