Columns
Spirituality



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June 5, 2023

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My parish has begun the journey of merging with another parish to create a new one. Sound familiar? Combining, merging — whatever word fits — is becoming a very common phenomenon in the United States. It is usually not welcome news. Changes, big changes, are part and parcel of the endeavor, and changes are difficult. There is mourning for what was and trepidation for what may come. The grieving process is necessary to allow for a new community of faith to be born, and we have the words of Jesus and Paul to guide us:

> No one puts new wine into old wines: otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins: but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins. (Mark 2:22).
>
> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the person is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

No doubt that people involved in the process of bringing a new faith community to reality have heard these words before, yet the work of birthing a new family of faith requires prayer, work, determination and letting go. The letting go aspect is critical for the creative movement to emerge. Allowing the Spirit to move through the hearts and minds of the people is where we often stumble. Without realizing it, we hold on to established routines and structures, and though the structures don't seem to fit any more, they are comfortable because they are familiar. The old structures (or old wineskins) become an obstacle to working together to bring forth a new community.

At this time in our faith history we are given the opportunity to respond to Pope Francis' exhortation to synodality. The Holy Father said in his 2023 Lenten message: "What awaits us at the end is undoubtedly something wondrous and amazing, which will help us to understand better God's will and our mission in the world."

It is all about seeing our parishes as faith families. As with our nuclear families, we have to work to be fully present to each other. The synodality sessions were founded on the concept of listening to one another. It is critical to ask questions for clarification to better appreciate the members of our new faith community.

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We humans are constantly offered opportunities to evolve. When a couple decides to have a child, their combined DNA will develop into a new person. They accept the sacred challenge to raise a child, not knowing what the future holds for the child or for them. They are a new family. And, as with any family, they experience joys and sorrows. Yet nothing new is created without allowing love and creativity to bolster the courage it takes to begin something new. When we refuse by staying in our comfortable space, we lose the opportunity to expand our spirituality and experience newness.

I enjoy working with clay. I have thrown clay on the wheel and created small vases and pots. Another way to create with clay is to use the coiling method. Or you can fashion pottery pieces from long and short bands of clay. You have to work it on the wheel, or roll it and cut it in various widths and lengths.

It's also fun to use clay of different hues. Some clay is gray; some has various hues of reddish brown. Using different kinds of colored clay allows for a dramatic coil receptacle. You can add colors by glazing the pottery before you fire it, which allows an unlimited number of possibilities.

Let's be creative! If we believe that the Divine Spirit is alive in us, perhaps we can use our talents in creating something new. To get our creative juices flowing, I suggest gathering in small groups of people from the merging parishes and making coil vessels. Different colors of clay can symbolize the unique traditions and customs of the parishes that come together to create a new community.

Beyond parish meetings dealing with the business of combining the parishes, opportunities to be together in creative and social gatherings will stimulate and foster meaningful relationships. The foundation for growth depends on our respect and appreciation of one another. We will come to relish the various coils that become the new vessel that holds our sacred community.