

The Biblical Meaning of Fellowship

The first fact concerns the meaning of the Greek root. Our English word, “fellowship” is the translation of the Greek word, “*koinonia*.” This Greek word is derived from the root, “*koinos*,” which was a prefix in ancient Greek. If you were to add this prefix to words meaning “living,” “owning a purse,” “a dispute,” and “mother,” you would get words meaning “living in community together,” “owning a purse in common,” “a public dispute,” and “having a mother in common.” So we see that the root of the word, “fellowship,” means “to hold something in common.”

Our second fact relates to the usage of the word, “fellowship.” The Greek word, “*koinonia*,” was used to describe corporations, labor guilds, partners in a law firm, and the most intimate of marriage relationships. From the usage of the word, we can conclude that fellowship is a word denoting a relationship that is dependent on more than one individual. It is an interdependent relationship.

A third fact is that “fellowship” was never used to describe man’s relationship to God before the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the church. It is an exclusively post-pentecost relationship.

A fourth fact about the meaning of “fellowship” can be gleaned by comparing it to its New Testament synonyms. These are words which have overlapping but not the identical meaning of *koinonia*. The four synonyms of *koinonia* in the New Testament are *philos*, which means “related by love for outward characteristics”; *hetairos*, meaning a sharer in a common enterprise; *sunergos*, meaning a fellow-worker; and *metochos*, a participant. Each of these words denotes a unity which is expressed outwardly. This is true of fellowship but by contrast, fellowship is also an inner unity.

Fifth, however, we must note that fellowship does not stop with being an inner unity for it is primarily an action word! *Koinonia* is used nineteen times in the New Testament and in addition to being translated as “fellowship” it is also translated by the words, “contribution,” “sharing,” and “participation.” **A close study of the usage of this word shows that action is always included in its meaning. Fellowship, you see, is not just being together, it is doing together! This is a point almost universally ignored by Christian groups today.**

Our sixth observation concerning the meaning of “fellowship” is that it is a unique relationship with Christ. We have a relationship of being “in Christ.” We also have a relationship of being “a part of Christ’s body.” Fellowship is neither. It is not “being in” or “being part” but it is “doing with” Christ. It is our partnership with Christ in fulfilling God’s will.

Our final observation may be gleaned from the last and it is this: that fellowship is not just doing anything together. It is only doing God’s will together. Quite obviously, our fellowship

with others is only as good as our fellowship with Christ, our unity. And we can only participate with Him in doing God's will, for that is all He ever does! For this reason we must quit thinking of Christian fellowship as primarily doing things such as having pot luck dinners or watching football or playing basketball with other believers. These have their place but they are only fellowship to the extent that rest, exercise, and eating are doing the work of the Lord. Fellowship involves actively doing God's will. The things we usually think of as fellowship are certainly not the primary meaning of the word!

What is important to see here is that no individual working alone could ever fulfill this plan of showing every perfection of God for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So you see, the very nature of God's plan necessitates the Godly capacities of many individuals added together to show His perfections to the world. You might say that God's plan must be compared not to a solo but to a symphony. In order to fully manifest God, each person must not only play his part but must play it together. The instruments are our spiritual gifts and natural abilities. And the indispensable means we use to perform is fellowship, our co-participation in accomplishing His purpose. It is only as we work together in this way that it is possible to accomplish God's plan. This is why fellowship is indispensable to the church.

Are Catholics Super-Friends? The problem with parish life

**“Church friends are super-charged friends”
according to new research — but does
Catholic parish life today foster church
friends?**

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by Steven D. Greydanus Tuesday, March 06, 2012 9:37 AM Comments (88)



An intriguing [story from Catholic News Service](#) highlights research that suggests that “the more church friends a person has, the happier he or she is.”

“Church friends are super-charged friends, but we have no idea why,” Harvard public policy professor Robert D. Putnam told a [Gallup summit on religion, wellbeing and health last month](#).

It’s an intriguing finding, and in a way a worrisome one—or rather, it accentuates a worrisome trend in contemporary Catholic parish life: No matter how many banners and signs on Catholic churches proclaim that here is a vibrant “Catholic community,” many Catholic parishes today *aren’t* communities that foster vital personal relationships among parishioners.

First, the science. The research, conducted by Putnam and Chaeyoon Lim, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was published in the *American Sociological Review* ([available via PDF](#)).

Their findings suggest that the well-supported findings of beneficial effects of religious practice are closely connected with two factors: First, you have to be very committed to your religion; being only moderately religious doesn't help, and may even make people less happy than being non-religious.

Second, you need close friends in your religious congregation. Attending religious services without forming congregational friends doesn't make you happier, and may even make you less happy. And those with similar numbers of non-church friends don't get the same benefit either. Even having friends outside of church with similar worldviews, or of the same religion, doesn't provide the same benefit; apparently, it's "regular encounters and *shared religious experiences with congregational friends*" that does the trick.

We've all heard that "the family that prays together stays together." Apparently something similar applies to groups of religious friends as well: *Friends who worship regularly together promote each other's wellbeing like nothing else.*

All of this raises concerns about social patterns in American Catholic churches today.

Here's one way to put the problem. The CNS news story above is headlined, "Researcher's advice to pastors: Spend more time on church suppers." The lede paragraph reads, "Harvard public policy professor Robert D. Putnam has a tongue-in-cheek suggestion for pastors: 'Spend less time on the sermons, and more time arranging the church suppers.'"

Church suppers? When's the last time you went to one of those at your parish?

Many Catholic churches today have several Masses throughout the weekend—half a dozen isn't uncommon in some areas—to maximize people's chances of meeting their Mass obligation. A great many Catholics, even those who regularly attend Mass, aren't loyal to one particular Mass time, but vary their attendance based on which Mass happens to be most convenient for their schedule that weekend.

What's more, many Catholics have different parishes in the area to pick on any given weekend, the way Suz decides whether to go grocery shopping at Stop & Shop, ShopRite or Costco depending on what she needs at the moment and how much time she has.

The net effect is that many Catholics attend Sunday Mass with a bunch of strangers, not just occasionally, but on a regular basis. Mass is not an occasion for social connection for

many Catholics, any more than going grocery shopping is. People go to Mass to meet their obligation and receive the sacraments, not to connect with friends.

All too often, in too many parishes, half the congregation is out the door as soon as the recessional hymn begins, or as soon as the priest has left the sanctuary. The goal is often to get to one's car as quickly as possible, before the press to exit the parking lot.

The **supersizing of Catholic parish life** hasn't helped. With churches closing and merging, fewer churches are offering more Masses for disparate communities with no historical ties. The old ethnic parishes have either succumbed to demographic shifts or found themselves merged into new parishes without the same ethnic identities. These shifts may come with pluses as well as minuses, but I'm only considering the quality of parish life as a center of community, and we aren't doing well there.

Protestants, whose churches tend to be *a tenth the size of Catholic churches*, do community much better. Even Protestant megachurches often manage to do community better than Catholic churches. First, Protestant megachurches typically offer very few services: One major Sunday morning service, or at most two, is common, and if there are two they may cater to very different communities (e.g., a more "traditional" service and a more "contemporary" one). Second, large Protestant churches build smaller subcommunities: Bible studies or small groups, adult Sunday school classes and so on.

Catholic churches, for the most part, don't do these things.

Here is my experience: The year before we were received into the Catholic Church, Suz and I were married in a large Presbyterian church in Charlotte. We attended worship services on Sunday and went to adult Sunday school classes after that. We had a weekly "small group" that met for Bible study and prayer. In a word, we had church friends.

Our experience in the Catholic Church was much rockier. We had a few Catholic friends, but we were all going to different parishes. None of the parishes were very tolerable liturgically or musically. Later we moved to Philadelphia, where the quality of liturgy was better. We did connect to a vital network of Catholic young people, partly through St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, where I was taking classes, and partly through monthly pro-life Masses and abortion clinic prayer vigils sponsored by the **Helpers of God's Precious Infants**. Still, we never had a parish home with any sense of community, and never had friends at church.

Both in Philadelphia and in our home state of New Jersey, when we moved back, I tried hard to start a parish-based Bible study or some other forum for adult community outside Mass. For awhile a few old ladies attended my Bible study in Philadelphia. For the most part, though, it was a bust.

Coming back to New Jersey was particularly hard. For five years we wandered in the wilderness, considering ourselves comparatively lucky to be able to find some ugly church with lame music where the Mass and the preaching were at least endurable. It was a very arid, lonely, miserable time, and it broke my heart, especially as I saw my kids getting older, and I prayed and prayed and prayed for God to deliver us.

And then, about a decade ago, He did.

A new job, a new commute, a new house in a new neighborhood, and we found ourselves in a parish utterly different from anyplace we had ever been. For the first time in our Catholic lives, we have a church home and super-charged church friends.

Most of us regularly attend the same Mass. After Mass, there's no rush to the parking lot. If the weather permits, there's always a group of people hanging out in the courtyard talking, and once a month we have coffee and donuts in the parish center. We get together with church friends outside Mass. It's wonderful.

But it's also pretty unusual. Unusual enough that many of our church friends drive considerable distances to be at our parish. Our family is lucky to live just a couple of miles from our church, but some of our friends drive a half hour to be here on Sunday mornings. I'm glad that they do, but I'm sorry that there aren't more churches with communities like ours.

Session 1 – April 28, 2012

**Theme: Pentecost
The Beginning of the Church
Fellowship & Community**

Acts 2, 1-13; 42-47

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. 2 And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, 2 and it filled the entire house in which they were. 3 Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, 3 which parted and came to rest on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, 4 as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. 6 At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? 9 We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, 11 both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." 12 They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others said, scoffing, "They have had too much new wine."

42 They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. 46 Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Session 2 – May 5, 2012

Theme: Jesus never once says “worship me”. He says, “Follow me”. Christianity is a lifestyle—a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving.

Mt 4:19

He said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Psalms 27:17

As iron sharpens iron, so man sharpens his fellow man.

John 15:9-17

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. 11 "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. 12 This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my father. 16 It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. 17 This I command you: love one another.

Session 3 – May 12, 2012

Theme: “Thy kingdom come,” as we say in the Our Father, clearly means that the Kingdom is something that enters into this world, or, as Jesus puts it elsewhere, the Reign of God “is close at hand”. It’s a reality that breaks into this world whenever people act as God would act. When that can happen in terms of structures or groups, then you have a taste of the Kingdom descending to earth. When “two or three” rightly gathered, they are the critical mass, or “leaven” who can and will change the world.

Mt 18:20

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them

2 Cor 13:13

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Session 4 – May 19, 2012

Theme: Paul frequently describes his work as creating living households, temples, and written letters that manifest the inner message. It was a very organic notion of church, built from within by people who personally know the Christ experience, and exhibit various charismatic gifts to prove it. This created an experience-based religion as opposed to mere external belief systems and ritual practices.

1 Cor 1:9

God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hebrews 10:23-25

Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy. 24 We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works. 25

We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Session 5 – May 26, 2012

Theme: Small group fellowship and community are effective at developing individual spiritual growth and greatly beneficial to the vitality and mission of a parish.

Christifideles Laici; John Paul II, (December 30,1988)

“So that all parishes of this kind may be truly communities of Christians, local ecclesial authorities ought to foster the following: a) adaptation of parish structures according to the full flexibility granted by canon law, especially in promoting participation by the lay faithful in pastoral responsibilities; b) small, basic or so-called 'living' communities, where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another; these communities are true expressions of ecclesial communion and centers of evangelization, in communion with their pastors.”

Session 6 – June 2, 2012

Theme: Communion of Saints is the unity and cooperation of the whole Church (community). The Church has three levels of existence; Church Militant on earth, the Church Suffering in purgatory, and the Church Triumphant in heaven.

Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross (through him), whether those on earth or those in heaven.