**A Heartfelt Thanks in Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

In every community of faith – as in any other society or family – there are always those who take on roles of enormous yet underappreciated significance. In our parishes, the people who run parish offices as our office managers and parish secretaries are some of those people. To all of you, thank you!

It is easy to forget that you are the people who are, so often and in so many ways, the face of our parishes.

You are the ones who convey the welcome of a parish when someone calls, emails or visits to register in a new parish, seeking a spiritual home. You also convey this welcome when someone who has been away from the Church for a long time, or who is taking tentative steps to learn more about the faith makes a call to learn more. Often, these inquiries happen in times of change or new beginnings – and a warm welcome can make a stranger feel at home.

You are the ones who may receive a first phone call from grieving families who want to plan funerals for their beloved and cannot contain the sorrow that fills their hearts at this vulnerable moment. Or, you may receive the frantic calls from those who hope to arrange final sacraments for dying loved ones before it is too late. A kind word and heartfelt sympathy may seem unimportant, but it means more than you will know.

You are the ones who know so many confidences about parishioners and keep these confidences in your hearts. It is no accident than the root word of “secretary” is “secret!” So often, parishioners will pour out their personal information to you with the unspoken expectation that this will remain in confidence.

You are the ones who field angry phone calls from strangers who vent their grievances about religion, the Church and God – or call regularly on Monday mornings to gripe about a Sunday homily, a second collection, the décor of the church, a typo in the bulletin, or the music at Mass. When certain phone numbers pop up on your caller ID, you might even say a quick prayer for patience before you answer!

You are the ones who answer the knocks on the door from those in distress – material, spiritual or otherwise. Even in our skeptical times, those in trouble seek solace and support from the Church. With many churches closed during the day, it is to parish offices that we come in time of need.

You are the ones who share in the joy of helping couples plan the details of their weddings—with all the logistics and paperwork that this involves. You may also, at times, quietly shake your head when couples make unreasonable demands or extravagant requests more suited to grand theatrical productions than the sacrament you are helping them arrange.

You are the ones who answer phone calls from visitors who want to know Mass times, details about special events, driving directions, and building accessibility. These miscellaneous inquiries, expected and unexpected, require you to pivot with grace from a deeply heartbreaking conversation with a grieving parishioner to a call from someone who demands to know why your church does not have a convenient parking lot.

You are the ones who support the clergy in all of the administrative tasks that are unseen by parishioners – paying bills, recording income, acknowledging donations, handling personnel and payroll, arranging meetings, caring for the physical plant, coordinating with the parish school and religious education programs, responding to emergencies, and addressing the myriad administrative obligations to the diocese.

You are the ones who welcome new pastors and help them learn the quirky intricacies of their new families and help them as they bring both change and continuity. When parishes close, as all too many have, you may feel this grief in a particular way as the family you serve is dispersed.

You are the ones who, in preparing the parish bulletins and maintaining the parish website and social media, present the parish to the public, with the hope that this outreach will build community in good and holy ways.

You are the ones who know so many in the parish as your friends, and take on our joys and griefs in the seasons of our lives.

In this season, post-Easter, when baptisms, confirmations, first Holy Communions, weddings, ordinations, and celebrations of all kinds pack parish calendars you are busier than ever. So, perhaps now more than ever, it is right to say thank you. Gratefully, a heartfelt thanks for all you do for us through all the seasons of our ordinary, and not-so-ordinary times.

PS: To Cathy, Lorraine, Claire and Sherri – and all the other parish secretaries in all the places I have called home – special thanks for all your kindnesses to me.

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