

Catholic Theological, Systemic, and Pastoral Foundations for Strengths Development

Part One: Strengths in Catholic Parish Life: Theological Foundations:

Created in God's Image

Our beginning point for exploration of the theological foundations for strengths development is in the moment of creation. We are created in God's image, intended to be that image in our world. We are given freedom to choose to be people who do this well or poorly; we can become blind and deaf to the grace of our talents in our lives, or we can become attuned to them, willing to develop and offer our talents throughout our lives. As people who are created in the image and likeness of God, each of us is unique: we have different combinations of talents and interests, life experiences and circumstances. In recognizing our talents, we realize that our lives are filled with tremendous potential to positively impact our world. We are called to live as collaborators with God in the ongoing process of creation, and to do so with others. Each person is "fearfully and wonderfully made," bearing many talents, and it takes each of us doing what we can to bear the fullness of God's image.

Baptized into Christ, Called to Self-Giving

We who are baptized are drawn deeply into Christ and Christ's Body, the Christian community. As Christians, we are to bear the image of Jesus, who shows us the depths of God's love and compassion. Fr. Michael Himes captures what this means for us: *"And who, finally, are you? You are the image and likeness of God. If God is pure self-gift, then self-gift is the image in which we are made, the blueprint on which we are built. Therefore, to give ourselves away is what we most deeply desire."* (*Doing the Truth in Love*, 56-57) Knowing our talents gives us insight into the practical ways we can live in this self-giving

way. We find that building on the grace of God in our lives which we perceive in our talents is a way of intense joy and meaning. In giving, we find abundant life and satisfaction.

Called to Discipleship, Called to Serve

As Christian people, we are called to live as disciples. A disciple is one who is learning the ways of a master. Our Master and Teacher is Jesus Christ. Learning Jesus' way means learning to serve, to see and fill in others their need for God's love and mercy, forgiveness and justice, peace and compassion. Jesus shows us how to put our lives in the hands of God in trust, and knowing our talents helps us to do this well. When we become more deeply aware of the talented persons we are, it is easier for us to discern the ways in which we may give of ourselves for others. While the things we are called to do will change in the course of our lifetime, drawing on our God-given talents equips us to answer God's call, in our lives at home and at work, in our parish and community.

The U.S. Bishops, in their pastoral letter on stewardship, discern in John 1:35-40 two lessons on the vocation of a disciple: "This fast-paced narrative at the beginning of John's Gospel (see John 1: 35-50) teaches us a number of lessons. For our purposes, two stand out.

One is the personal nature of a call from Jesus Christ. He does not summon disciples as a faceless crowd but as unique individuals. He knows people's personal histories, their strengths and weaknesses, their destinies; he has a purpose in mind for each one.

"This purpose is individual vocation. "Only in the unfolding of our lives and its events," says Pope John Paul II, "is the eternal plan of God revealed to each of us" (Christifideles Laici, no 58). Every human life, every personal vocation, is unique.

"And yet, the vocations of all Christians do have elements in common. One of these is the call to be a disciple. In fact, we might say that to be disciples -- to

follow Christ and try to live his life as our own -- is the common vocation of Christians. Discipleship in this sense is Christian life." (Stewardship: A Disciple's Response, 14)

Stewards of the Persons We Are and Will Be

Discovering and accepting our talents gives us a means for developing a real appreciation for the persons we are. We see God's hand as the Giver of these talents, and we grow in gratitude for the abundance we recognize within ourselves. This growing sense of gratitude leads us to respond generously. We know in our hearts that we can never measure the lavish love and grace of God in our lives, and so our best response is to be generous in giving, sacrificially generous! Not only this, once we have discovered our talents and we appreciate the personal nature with which we are endowed, we realize we must develop our talents, building strengths. Given much, we are called to be good stewards of all we are and have and will be. To paraphrase the wisdom of our U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on stewardship, being a good steward of our talents means "to receive them gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord."

Part Two: Strengths in Catholic Parish Life: Systemic Foundations

Cultivating a Spirituality of Communion

"To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings," Pope John Paul II wrote in his pastoral letter at the turn of the century, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (#43). It is this spirituality of communion we are cultivating when we embrace strengths development within our parishes. By doing so, our daily interactions with one another take on deeper meaning. We learn through our

interactions with each other that while appreciating the talent God has given each of us, our talents are given for the good of all, not as something for the individual to prize or hoard.

Again from Blessed Pope John Paul II: “A spirituality of communion indicates above all *the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us*, and whose light we must also be able to see *shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us*.

“A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within *the profound unity of the Mystical Body*, and therefore as *“those who are a part of me”*. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.

“A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to *see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God*: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a “gift for me”.

“A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to *“make room” for our brothers and sisters*, bearing “each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy.

“Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.” (Novo Millennio Ineunte, #43)

[The CliftonStrengths© Talent Identification Instrument](#)

If our talents are so innate within us, why do we need an online questionnaire to point them out for us? It is for this very reason that CliftonStrengths is helpful. Our greatest areas of talent are patterns of thinking, feeling or behaving that come so naturally to us that we often do not recognize them

without some help. The research of Dr. Donald Clifton and his team, which is the foundation of strengths, tells us much about the ways in which we experience our talents, and why it is so important that we do so. We are at our best when we do what we do best, the research tells us. Weakness-fixing at best produces adequacy. But strengths development goes much deeper. We find that living with an awareness and acceptance of our God-given talents helps us to be more patient with others, more understanding and forgiving, find greater meaning and purpose in our lives, and to live with a sense of hope. Surely this is what God desires for his preeminent creation!

CliftonStrengths© is an online questionnaire. On completing CliftonStrengths, an individual is given a list of his or her Top 5 themes out of the possible 34 themes of talent identified through over thirty years of study. Because CliftonStrengths is research-based, people frequently report that their Signature Themes resonate with their experience differently than with other self-assessments they have done in the past. And because strengths is developmental, it is actionable. This is not simply about being aware of our talents; this is an ongoing process of cultivating, sharing and developing our talents to yield with increase, as good stewards of the very unique persons we are.

Strengths Applications

The StrengthsFinder questionnaire is found in a number of books, each developed with a particular audience in mind:

Living Your Strengths (available in a Catholic edition) is the book most parishes use, since it includes both personal development guidance and ideas for ways people can use their talents in ministry and service;

CliftonStrengths for Students (previously called *StrengthsQuest*) is written primarily for youth and young adults, although it can be used by adults of any age. It includes considerations for using our strengths in academics and relationships as well as more general development. This is the book many

parishes use with Confirmation candidates; leaders can purchase codes without books for use with groups of youth.

Teach With Your Strengths offers ideas for how teachers can use their talents in their classrooms, and is often used with Catholic school faculty and religious education catechists.

StrengthsFinder 2.0 is a general application of strengths and includes an updated questionnaire with a somewhat personalized report which takes into account the person's Top 5 themes in developing the description of each of those themes.

Strengths Based Leadership is often used in leader groups such as parish staff, pastoral council, or ministry teams, since this book looks specifically at the impact of positive leadership and effective team-building. It presents four domains of leadership which help teams to identify ways in which each person can have opportunities to contribute with meaning.

StrengthsFinder Codes: In September, 2012, Gallup opened www.gallupstrengthscenter.com. At this website, individuals and organizations can purchase StrengthsFinder codes without a book. Parish leaders now have the means to offer StrengthsFinder in a more accessible and less expensive manner. To create a process that is as beneficial as possible for participants, parishes offer participants the option of purchasing a code or a *Living Your Strengths* book, and have used copies of *Living Your Strengths* for participants to borrow during their initial exploration.

Part Three: Engagement in Catholic Parish Life: Pastoral Foundations

The essential concepts contained in strengths development are simple and have the potential for profound impact in our pastoral practice. We find ourselves building on what is the best about each person, what is positive, rather than dwelling on what is not; we find freedom to be ourselves, to trust

each other, and to find hope in Christ and in the community of which we are a part.

Community as a Relationship

Reading *Growing an Engaged Church*, we find ourselves understanding that when people come into a parish, they are entering into a potential relationship. Viewing the parish in this light helps us to grasp the impact of the connection between strengths and engagement. In fact, one of the transformative aspects of engagement is that this research-verified dynamic of communal life is expressed as a *feeling* or a *sense*. People know engagement when they *feel* it or *sense* it; they are also conscious of its absence when such is true of a parish's life. People readily feel growth in engagement and respond accordingly, particularly when they find that it is hoped and expected that every person will give of her- or himself as a good steward of the talents she or he has been given.

Every Person is of Value, the Community is of Value

In an engaged parish, individuals perceive that every person is of value, and that the community is of value in their lives. This value on the person does not stand in contradiction to the importance of worship in the community, but rather helps people to be predisposed to gather for communal worship with open minds and hearts, ready to be transformed by Christ, sure of the strength and the support of the community. As Catholic parishes become larger or are drawn into clusters of parishes that share pastoral leadership, the implications of such value are certain to become more apparent and of greater importance.