

OUR LADY OF CONSOLATION CHURCH
603 West Second Avenue
Parkesburg, Pennsylvania, 19365-1305
(610) 857-3510 FAX (610) 857-2353
WWW.olcchurch.org
E-MAIL vje@comcast.net

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My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today marks the thirty-seventh anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. It is a good day for me to reflect, with you, on a question our Pastoral Council has been pondering for the past couple of months. The question is, "What constitutes active membership in our parish?"

This question is pertinent for several reasons: 1) Celebration of Sacraments such as Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony; 2) Privileged use of parish facilities; 3) Parish subsidy of Catholic School and Religious Education; 4) Burial privilege in our parish cemeteries. Fairness and justice demand that those who actively support and involve themselves in the life of the parish are entitled to certain privileges, subsidies, and fees for service that recognize their generosity of time, talent, and treasure. Inactive members and non-members of the parish may be afforded some of those same services and privileges. But, the costs to those not actively involved in the life of the parish should reflect, at least, the actual cost to the parish for such services and privileges.

The best example I can give to illustrate this point is the policy that has been in place in our parish for many years with regard to the Catholic education of our children. A family who chooses Catholic school education for their child(ren) should be encouraged and assisted as much as possible to do so. This is not just the policy of our parish, but of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Since we ourselves do not have a parish school, our families have to pay non-parishioner rates at the Catholic schools in the area. However, we, as a parish, subsidize the difference between the tuition charged to active parishioners of those parishes sponsoring the school and the tuition they charge for non-parishioners. For instance, the difference charged between parishioners of the sponsoring parishes at Pope John Paul II School and non-parishioners is \$1,000.00. Therefore, we, as a parish, send the \$1,000.00 directly to our active families to subsidize the Catholic education of their child at Pope John Paul II. However, we do not subsidize the tuition of those who claim membership in our parish, but do not support or participate regularly in the Sacramental life of the parish.

Why do we make this distinction? As I suggested above, it is largely a matter of fairness and justice. That \$1,000.00 subsidy comes from the money that you generously contribute to the parish. Isn't it fair and just that those benefiting from your generosity should share the burden with you and celebrate the life of Christ with you?

It is also important to reflect on what we are not saying in establishing the criteria for active parishioners. First of all, we are not putting anyone out of the Church. Nor are we looking down on anyone who is not actively engaged in the parish. On the contrary, we have put these policies and procedures in place in the hope that all our members will become more conscientiously active in our parish and we are providing incentives wherever possible to encourage conscious, active participation.

Finally, as I reflect back some forty-seven years ago, when I began my study of the Church and journey in the priesthood, the most important lesson I learned with regard to membership in the Church was to look at the Church as a series of concentric circles. Those in the inner circle, who in our reflection, might be those whom we consider "active members". Those in the circle, just outside the inner circle, might be considered members who are somewhat engaged, the C.A.P.E. Catholics, if you will. Those who participate on Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, and Easter. Then, in a circle a little further out are those really good people who believe, but just can't bring themselves to join in the life of the Church or may even belong to other faith communities. These too are related to us in faith, as sisters and brothers living under the Fatherhood of God. Finally, there are those in the most outer ring, the kindly non-believers in our midst. They too belong to the Church and should be, perhaps dearest to our hearts, as the objects of our love and attention so that they may come to know the Christ who dwells within us.

So, please do not misconstrue the policies that follow as in any way being exclusionary. Rather, they simply enunciate, if I may paraphrase, the old American Express advertisement, "(Active) Membership has its privileges!"

Thank you for your patience in reading all of this, and what follows, and thanks, most especially, to the members of Pastoral Council who spent many prayerful and, sometimes painful, hours developing these policies and procedures for all of us.

Your brother in Christ,
Fr. Victor J. Eschbach
Rev. Victor J. Eschbach
Pastor