***Dealing with Difficult People and Ministering to the De-Churched***

Have you ever noticed that when there is conflict “I” am not a difficult person — but the person with whom I have conflict is VERY difficult?

During the course of living the Forty Days of Lent, in particular, it is a good practice to look over our lives and recall the various conflicts we have had with people. Then it is a good thing to look again and see what God has done with those relationships. When the Bible addresses conflict and estrangement it is understood that conflict and estrangement relate to relationships with those who do not follow Christ. In the Christian community, conflict is seen as an opportunity for reconciliation and grace and the Bible even tells us how to do that.

Sadly, many who have had significant conflict outside of the Church all too often bring into the Church those behaviors. Conflict and estrangement related to parents, spouse(s), children, grandchildren, friends, neighbors, relatives, members of social and fraternal groups, etc. — unless we and they repent and amend our ways — we should never be surprised when we/they find ourselves/themselves in the middle of a conflict. Sometimes it is because strong-willed people expect everyone else to “fall in line.” Sometimes it is because when a strong-willed person must work with another strong-willed person, without grace and humility there is conflict and estrangement. Sadly, for some, there are two ways to do something “MY way and the wrong way!”

A great deal of my life has been spent ministering to and with what we call the “de-churched.” As both a priest and as a bishop I have planted churches. So very often today when we think of “church plants” we focus on the unchurched. Obviously, this is an important and significant goal, but what about the people who were formerly members of a church, were active, and then they were gone from the Church never to be seen again. Although we may conclude that this departure is usually a result of a “crisis of faith” it should not be surprising to know that more often it is due to conflict with fellow church members or with the leadership: ordained and lay. Why? How can that be if the parish is the Body of Christ?

Over these 50 years of ordination, I have heard numerous stories from the de-churched, and I always listen very carefully. In Social and Educational Psychology and Sociology we have studies regarding Learning-Unlearning-Relearning. Those studies reveal that the amount of energy and time that it takes to “unlearn” and “relearn” is infinitely more significant than simply learning. Often times the de-churched are simply categorized as “inactive,” lapsed,” or “lost sheep” but as l have listened to their stories and when they are completely honest with me their unwillingness to go to or return to “church” has little or nothing to do with theology. Their reasons are not unlike lapsed members of the Elks Lodge or the Moose Lodge: strong-willed personality types battling for control causing a situation to be out of control.

So, now what do we do? At another time I will write about “reclaiming the de-churched” because it is a very complex and difficult task, but the people are really worth it. In many instances they have not lost their Faith but they have lost their faith in the local church. They have felt “run off,” “unappreciated,” “forgotten,” and healing needs to take place. What I would like to say is that this only happens with the laity, but remember much of my ministry is with clergy and clergy families.

I would encourage us as we do our self-evaluation regarding conflicts to look and see how often we, ourselves, may have been the “difficult person” and to ask God to heal us of that, since very few people really want to be difficult and many more would be surprised to hear that they are seen as “difficult.” Then let’s pray for the difficult people in our life. In many instances they need to be healed of damaged relationships of the past, and they need to have a recovery of Joy — a state of being, and not simply seek to be happy — an emotional state that can change.

Pray for those who no longer walk into a church, and if you are one of them, ask God for His healing power to enter you. You are worth it.