

## 7 Secrets of Successful Parishioner

Successful parishioners are those who are not satisfied at merely being a member of a parish. They are those who, among other things, believe in the adventure of being Catholic, believe in other parishioners and see the parish as the spiritual epicenter of life.

There was a time in our Church when the perfect parishioner was somewhat jokingly characterized as the person who would "pay, pray and obey." Of course, Catholic life in those generations was hardly that simple and certainly far more deep than that. During those years magnificent churches, thousands of schools, hospitals and orphanages were built and millions of lives were well lived, but with a different understanding of what it meant to be a "good Catholic."

With the revolutionary changes heralded by Vatican II—and which we are just beginning to actually understand today—Catholic parishioners find that their "job description" has been rewritten. With the invitation to be the "priesthood of all believers" comes a new kind of Catholic.

This all has been a bit jarring for some of the faithful who grew up with what might be called a more traditional style of Catholicism. But those who look deeply into our rich history will see that the tradition of the Church is intact: It merely renews itself so that, as we say at Mass, "from age to age" God gathers a people to worship and then to live out his love. With the "dawning of a new age," as Pope John Paul II says, we must reach out and practice our faith in new ways.

Over the past six years, I have visited more parishes than most Catholics will ever experience in a lifetime. I was researching my book *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* and I wanted to find out what made successful parishes "tick." In the process I also found what it was that went into the making of successful parishioners. For after all, it is these successful parishioners who make successful, happy, holy, wonderful-homes-for-the-spirit parishes. I'd like to, if I might, let you in on what I consider the Seven Secrets of Successful Parishioners.

### Successful Parishioners...

#### 1) Believe in the Adventure of Being Catholic

Yes, nothing short of that—adventure.

While doing their best to be faithful daughters or sons of the Church, successful parishioners practice what I call "entrepreneurial Catholicism." This kind of parishioner is not afraid to risk, to innovate, to ask questions, and never is quite satisfied with the status quo.

Current parish ministries, current parish budgets, current parish facilities are but the starting point, the launching pad, to be built upon, expanded, changed, sometimes upended.

"We've never done that before" or "That's not in the budget" are not insurmountable barriers to living out what successful parishioners know is the gospel mandate to heal and serve and comfort and educate and evangelize. They are optimists who say, "This is too good an opportunity to pass up; let's do it, let's find the money and the people somehow, some way."

Harvard Business School is famous for its "management by objective" approach—in other words: What is the goal and what must be done to achieve it? That is the way the successful parishioner approaches parish life: Now that we know what we need or want to do in our parish, what are the steps we will have to

go through to make it a reality? Stewardship Sunday check-off lists are but a beginning for the possibilities they envision.

Successful parishioners are not afraid to take chances. They are willing to risk. They will try this approach or that innovative ministry, realizing there is no guarantee of success. Parish life has a research and development aspect to it. Successful parishes are not composed of parishioners who have settled into a safe comfort zone of the tried and true. They are up for the adventure and, in the process, they derive an enormous energy from being a Catholic in a parish. Yes, it is work, but they get a real kick out of it.

## 2) Believe in Other Parishioners

There is a wonderful passage in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, as the impressionable young Nick assesses just what it is about Gatsby that he finds so appealing.

"He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor.

"It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you at your best, you hoped to convey."

So it was with Christ as he looked to that handful of people who would be his first disciples—and they, in turn, would become the religious giants that the look and trust of Christ told them they could be. They were neither the elite nor the educated, nor the professionally religious. They grew to meet his expectations.

So it is in our parishes. The successful parishioner looks out over the parish and sees untapped talent, seeds waiting to sprout, an abundance of goodness just waiting to be summoned for whatever task is at hand. It's all there, the successful parishioner senses. It doesn't need to be "hired out"; it just needs to be summoned forth.

And when the successful parishioner looks out with that Gatsbyesque, Christ-like look, amazing things happen. People begin to believe in themselves. People who may not have seen their latent talents now see them. All of us so badly want to be affirmed, not looked over. To be recognized for what we do well, not criticized for what we do poorly. For someone to see that amazing core we have. In committee meetings, involved in ministries, or simply being there at weekend liturgies with that gift of believing in fellow parishioners—even when things may not be going well—the successful parishioner provides the positive energy that affirmation always yields.

## 3) See the Parish as the Spiritual Epicenter of Their Life

No, this does not mean that they spend every waking hour at the parish (not always recommended), or that they are necessarily daily communicants (certainly recommended). But the successful parishioner sees the parish as a sturdy base of operations. This is surely the place where they are spiritually refreshed by participation in liturgy or where they might spend quiet time alone in personal prayer and reflection. But it is also the place where they know

goodness is valued, where they can speak easily and often about the challenges and beauties of life's pilgrimage. And this is crucially important to them, for there is no other place in our lives quite the same as the parish. Here a level of trust is a given, a certain common language is spoken, assumptions are made that demand the best of them.

To the successful parishioner, the parish is the Church. This takes nothing away from the universal Church of which we all are a part. But a universal church does not have the companionship, the immediacy, the intimacy of the parish and the successful parishioner continually returns to this spiritual home. This is the extended spiritual family, promising fellow travelers for this portion of the pilgrimage that is our lives.

Successful parishioners simply won't—and don't—pass up this continuing opportunity to both take stock of themselves and be refreshed and inspired to go on.

#### 4) Do Not Always Have to Win or Be Right

The successful parishioner cares too much about the parish to look upon it as a jousting match or a place where ego must triumph and be continually fed.

While being a person who has strong opinions, ideas, feelings, quirks, likes and dislikes, the successful parishioner is also a team player. Successful parishioners know that the wisdom of the group must often prevail over an individual's passionate desires. And yet, there are times when they have to boldly state their beliefs, the facts, their line of reasoning, and press forward. Yes, there may be times when a path of action is so clear and necessary it must be held onto, but that does not mean that every decision, action, change must be the object of endless debate, bruised feelings or—and this happens too often over what are usually the finer points of parish life—downright hostility.

Discernment, carefully listening to others, charity come into play here. Successful parishioners continually try to look within themselves to see if it is the good of the parish community or their own willfulness that has the higher priority.

This "secret" is not one that strong-minded, active parishioners always practice well, but it is absolutely crucial in the makeup of the successful parishioner. For without it, the Holy Spirit has little room to influence or inform or steer.

The successful parishioner is a team player who tries to work toward worthwhile goals that are good for the whole church community, even though he or she may not totally agree with the ways those goals are being pursued.

#### 5) Are Proud Enough of the Parish to Represent It Well

Successful parishioners are ambassadors for their parish. While admitting the parish still has so much more to do to meet the needs of its people, the community and the world, they speak in positive terms about what their parish is doing. Without being boastful, they are proud of their parish's accomplishments, presence in the community, future plans.

They are not shy about both proclaiming they are Catholic and living out their Catholicism in a specific place. They mention their parish in conversation at work or among friends. They might even mention it in the hardware store or the supermarket, when appropriate—with appropriate pride. They are proud of their parish and they want others to know about it, not so much that

they will get a pat on the back, but that others will know that there is a place where people in community are attempting, with God's ever-present help, to live better lives and to make this world a better place.

More important than speaking about their parish, they represent what it stands for with their very actions. There is perhaps no greater compliment within Catholicism than to hear someone say, "You can tell she (or he) attends St. John (or Immaculate Heart of Mary, or whatever the parish's name). There's something about that individual."

#### 6) Are Not Members, But Disciples

Membership has a static sound to successful parishioners. Quite frankly, it's not good enough for them. Attending or "doing their obligation" is not sufficient for this most important part of their life.

They would probably be the last ones to call themselves disciples, but that's what they are. They are trying to live a life that mirrors the life of Christ, for they see Christ as "the way, the truth and the life." They are trying to let others in on the wonderful, dynamic lifestyle that can be theirs. They are not simply members of some sort of comfortable club that makes no demands on them. Just going through the motions is too hollow for them.

Discipleship, not membership, characterizes how they choose to live a Catholic life within their parish and in their everyday life. As Christ saw needs in the world and tried to meet them, so do the successful parishioners who are not afraid to proclaim Christ's message—no, not with words, but with their actions.

They are not preservers of an institution, but practitioners of a way of life.

#### 7) Believe in the Power of Prayer and the Eucharist

While I've saved this "secret" for last, it is the most important. It is the very foundation of the successful parishioner's life. After all, what is all the work and involvement in parishes to accomplish, if it is not grounded in prayer? And without the Eucharist? Without God coming so urgently and completely into our lives?

Their prayer life is as varied as they are; the successful parishioner is not one to follow some stylized formula. No, rather their prayer erupts from their aching hearts, hearts that want to be close to God and to heal a broken world. They are quietly and humbly confident in their prayer life. Not that their prayers will be specifically answered as specifically offered, but that a loving God is reaching out to them as they reach out to him and, in that mystical interchange, they will receive not necessarily what they want or desire, but what they truly need.

They understand well the words of Scripture—when God is with us, who or what can prevail against us?

And the Eucharist provides the necessary and rich food for the journey of life. Successful parishioners do not look at the Eucharist as a reward for their good behavior. They know well their sins, shortcomings, impatience, anger, greed, lack of charity. But they also understand that

the love of God transcends all their failings and the Eucharist is a testament to a love that will never abandon them.

Christ, God, with them in a way unlike any other—that is the promise and the power of the Eucharist, and successful parishioners want the intimacy with God and neighbor that this wonderful gift provides.

As your eyes pass over this list of the Seven Secrets of Successful Parishioners, I'll bet you'll find that you can put a checkmark by a good number of them. Of course, your list of traits might be different from mine, but I offer these seven as threads that run through a healthy, happy and holy life as a Catholic, a life lived out involved in a Catholic parish today.

Paul Wilkes is the author of [The Seven Secrets of Successful Catholics](#), and creator of [New Beginnings](#), a parish revitalization program, which is distributed by St. Anthony Messenger Press. To find out more, go to [www.AmericanCatholic.org/NewBeginnings](http://www.AmericanCatholic.org/NewBeginnings).

**The Parish of St Mary and St Augustine Webster  
Begins its life on September 8th 2022.**

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