

WHAT KIND OF VISION DO YOU HAVE – 21/21 HINDSIGHT

By Susan Vogt, © 2004

At 21 young adults can drink legally. It's an important milestone. I have just finished 21 years as Director of the Family Ministry Office for the Diocese of Covington and it is also a milestone for me. I have decided to resign from the position that has taught me much about the deep spiritual yearnings of the good people of this diocese. Over the years readers have told me that they have enjoyed watching my family grow as I wrote about how my experience as a wife and mother intertwined with my faith. Following are seven qualities that I believe a vibrant, living Catholic Church should embody:

1. Collaboration

When my husband, Jim, and I first came to the Diocese of Covington we were thrilled to be directors of a diocesan office. We thought that we would finally be in a position to design the perfect model of family ministry drawing from the best practices we saw around the country. What we learned was that no minister is the Lone Ranger. It didn't matter how wonderful our ideas were, or even how right and gospel based they were. We needed to humbly learn to collaborate with other offices, volunteers, and the people in the pews. Being right is of little use if we can't inspire and motivate people to follow. Ministry is a collegial occupation and it takes many different disciplines working together to build the reign of God. To do this effectively takes a mighty big ear.

2. Listening

And thus I learned the importance of actively listening to the people I purport to serve. Of course most people *think* they listen well, but marriage has taught me that it's a lot more complicated than having good hearing. Listening to the people of God meant that I had to listen not only to people I got along with and agreed with but also to people who had different views than mine. It is only by seeking out the felt needs of the people that the Church can effectively respond. Fidelity to the teachings of the Church is assumed but I found that people of good will often have very different ways of implementing a shared goal. Real listening is a lot harder than it sounds, especially in situations where people disagree.

3. Conflict resolution

Since there will always be times when good people disagree, the Church needs to be skilled in conflict resolution. This does not mean that we always seek a middle ground or a compromise, although sometimes it might. There are core beliefs such as respecting the dignity of each human person and the primacy of love that are not negotiable. Jesus was not always mild mannered. At times he

spoke forcefully about what was right and just, but he also had a keen instinct for knowing when compassion had to override the letter of the law or the legalism of the Pharisees. He knew what was essential and what was window dressing. We need not fear disagreement; but rather blind conformity. A Church that can work through differences respectfully and skillfully is a Church worthy of its founder. Linked to conflict resolution is the ability to accept that our leaders will not always be right or perfect. A Church that is big enough to apologize and admit mistakes is a Church that will grow bigger still.

4. Unity in Diversity

Related to conflict resolution is the reality that the Church is made up of many different people, many different views, and many different styles. Our unity is in Jesus Christ and the way of life he taught. Trying to make Catholics all look alike, however, makes for a pretty gray group of people. Fr. Chaminade, founder of the Marianist religious order of which Jim and I are lay members, often talked about creating “union without confusion”. He emphasized that we need to welcome all members of the human community into the faith community. Yet people naturally find support through gathering with people who have common interests or share a state in life. The trick is to find ways that male and female, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, young and old can gather together and be enriched by their different styles rather than making them all vanilla.

5. Equality

As Mary Benet McKinney, OSB says in *Sharing Wisdom*, “No one has all the wisdom. Everyone has some of the wisdom. Everyone has a different piece.” What this says to me is that no one in our Church is higher or more important than another member. Everyone has an integral role to play and it is only in recognizing the wisdom that each of us brings and piecing it all together that we see the whole of God. No vocation is superior or holier than another. Each person must follow God’s lead to his or her own unique call. Each call will demand its own kind of sacrifice.

6. Grow from the grassroots up

Related to the concept of equality before God, is the awareness that Church works best from the ground up. Jesus didn’t start with the institution. He started with a group of friends who were willing to cast their lot together because they believed in him. They weren’t all smart. They weren’t all leaders or even well reputed. But they talked about what they had seen and how it had touched them. When the Church gets too caught up with appearances or the leaders live with more privilege than the common people, we lose our credibility; we may even lose our soul. I don’t claim to have this simple lifestyle thing under control but I know our faith calls us to solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Connecting with the common man or woman for the common good has to be a compass for us individually and for our Church as a whole.

7. Prayer

Of course, of course. Everyone is for prayer – as we should be. It's the communication with God that forms us. But isn't it ludicrous how sometimes we in the Church can argue over what is the right way to pray. Reverence of course is important, especially in public prayer, but sometimes we let the rubrics of worship destroy its spirit. As a family minister, one of my constant goals is to help families recognize their inherent holiness and that times of grace are not always – maybe not even often – times of formal prayer. Forgiving a spouse, taking the time to listen to a distraught toddler (even though I'm late), pausing to rejoice and thank God for the beauty of spring, or snow, or a sunset – all can put us in touch with the Divine if done with mindfulness.

So that's my vision of Church. I don't imagine we will ever capture this vision perfectly in this life, but it's what guides me in ministry. May we all carry it on.