

A tourist was in California and took the time to visit Muir Woods National monument, just north of San Francisco, home to a stand of redwoods – some of the tallest, and oldest, trees in the country.

She was surprised to hear the guide say that the redwoods have a very shallow root system -- that reach just barely below the surface of the earth.

Someone in the tour group exclaimed, “that’s impossible! I’m a country boy, and I know that if the roots don’t grow deep into the earth, strong winds will blow the trees over.”

The guide replied, “not redwoods. They grow only in groves and their roots intertwine under the surface of the earth. So, when the strong winds come, they hold each other up.”

The Church, and really any community worthy of the name – should be like those groves of redwoods --- havens for individuals – so that when the strong winds of life blow, fellow members of the body of Christ can serve as reinforcement ---- and strive together to hold each other up.

Moses certainly experienced that support and reinforcement in today’s first reading. . .

As the leader of Israel, Moses was allowing Joshua to wage the battle on the ground against Amalek --- while he, Moses, would wage the battle in the heavens – by praying for the success of the Israelite warriors.

As long as Moses was able to keep his arms outstretched in prayer – things went well for the Israelites. . . but when he grew tired and weary and let his arms down – Amalek had the better of the fight.

So, in order to insure an Israelite victory – Aaron and Hur – members of the community – held Moses’ arms steady when he became weary.

I don’t know what that is to teach us about prayer – but I do know what it is supposed to teach us about community. . .

That when we, ourselves, become tired and weary --- or feel beat up by the trials and tribulations of life, when we are afraid of what is yet to be, or lost and confused and uncertain of what we should do when the strong winds of life sweep down upon us --- that is when we most need community --- our brothers and sisters in Christ who serve as reinforcement and strive together to hold each other up.

Today is the kick off weekend for the newly named: Annual Catholic Appeal --- what used to be known as the Bishop’s Annual Appeal. . . If you haven’t yet received a letter from Bishop Johnston – you should be receiving one soon.

This appeal is one of many ways we are reminded that we aren’t an independent Catholic Church standing all alone here in [Odessa – Oak Grove] but rather part of a large Church: we are part of a Diocese and of a Universal Church ---- and we need each other, we need to work together – we need to strive together to hold each other up ---- IF WE ARE GOING TO STAND A CHANCE TO AT ACCOMPLISHING WHAT JESUS ASKES OF US --- TO ESTABLISH HIS KINGDOM HERE ON EARTH.

Of course the Scriptures remind us over and over again that community is essential. Scripture knows nothing of solitary Christians. People of faith are always members of a community. God never works with individuals in isolation – but always with people in community.

The very definition of a diocese, as found in canon law is: “A diocese is a portion of the people of God which is entrusted for pastoral care to a bishop with the cooperation of his priests so that, adhering to its shepherd and gathered by him in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and Eucharist – It constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative.” (Canon 369)

That's a long way of saying that we exist here in [Odessa – Oak Grove] only because of the Bishop – and that this isn't some kind of antagonistic relationship or one that restricts our freedom – but a relationship of mutual care and respect and support --- so that we can make Christ and the values of the Gospel present.

Now I will be honest -- from time to time, I do get a little cynical of the diocesan church – although much less now than in the last ten years. . .

But when cynicism does strike – the time I spend with the leaders of other churches in Odessa -- - can snap me out of that.

One of them is getting ready to construct a gym and multi-purpose building – and was asking at our recent ministerial alliance meeting for suggestions of banks that might fund the project. As Catholics all we have to do is ask the diocese for a loan.

One was wondering about just wages for the church's employees. Me – I just need to call the diocese and ask for the most recent employee salary scale.

One was wondering whether to give into a request to wear a robe for the celebration of a wedding – or to wear the suit he usually does. . . For us, we always know what to wear!

Last month two local ministers were struggling with whether or not to accept positions in other states --- and even though I may or may not like an assignment I am given --- I have to trust in the Bishop's leadership. . . and never have to worry about negotiating a salary or compensation package.

Whether it is how money counters should do their ministries, or how Eucharistic ministers do theirs, whether it is how money is handled at parish functions, Or what books could or should be used in religious education, how a church should be built or maintained, or how a stewardship or youth group can be organized, whether the issue is property insurance, wages and benefits, marriages or annulments ----

The answer for us Catholics is only a phone call away -- we don't have to reinvent the wheel every time an issue presents itself – as many protestant churches have to.

The diocesan church, in unity with our bishop – can be like that grove of redwoods – havens for us – so that when the strong winds of life blow, when problems rear their heads, or moments of great joy come along – the larger church of which we are members – can serve as reinforcement and encouragement.

Together, we hold each other up. Or as Bishop Johnston says of this campaign: “when we work together, we can accomplish so much more than when we are on our own.”