

Church as 'campaign headquarters'

By Ron Krietmeyer

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At the recent national conference on lay ministry that was held in the Twin Cities, I had an interesting conversation with Dr. Juan Hinojosa, the director of the Hillenbrand Institute in Chicago. This institute is dedicated to the study and development of lay ministry in the tradition of Msgr. Reynold Hillenbrand, a pioneer in promoting liturgical reform and the mission of the laity in the world.

FAITH AND JUSTICE

Here is a new way of looking at the church, a new image or model of how the church is supposed to work.

For several decades, starting in the 1930's, Msgr. Hillenbrand was a leader in developing lay

organizations dedicated to carrying out the church's social mission in the marketplace and the public arena. The Christian Family Movement and Catholic Action were among the lay organizations promoted by Msgr. Hillenbrand.

In describing the basic vision of his institute, Hinojosa shared with me a fascinating mental experiment.

He suggests that we try to think about the parish with an image that is different from the customary ones. The dominant models or images that are typically used are "community" or "family." For example, we say that the parish is a community that worships together or a family of believers.

Hinojosa has written an essay on this topic, in which he asks us to consider what would happen if we were to think through the identity and mission of the parish using a different metaphor — that of "campaign headquarters." This image, says Hinojosa, "moves the parish away from a focus on its inner life and solidly orients it toward its mission in the world. It is more dynamic than other models such as community or family."

Think about the idea of a campaign for a moment — a corporate campaign to launch a new product, a fund raising campaign to establish an endowment, a political campaign to get someone elected.

In each of these cases, the campaign headquarters does not exist for its own sake. It exists for the purpose of achieving a goal or winning a campaign. It exists in order to carry out a crusade or a quest which transcends the headquarters itself.

In short, the headquarters is not the goal. It is an instrument for achieving the goal.

Nevertheless, says Hinojosa, the campaign headquarters is important. The members of the campaign, the campaign workers, need the headquarters. They need the resources that are available there. They need the expertise, the training, the encouragement, and the direction that they get from the headquarters.

Without these resources from the headquarters, they would have little chance of accomplishing their mission and winning the campaign.

Note, however, that with this image the primary focus is always on winning the campaign, not on establishing a bigger or better campaign headquarters.

The image of campaign headquarters, says Hinojosa, "resonates powerfully with the reign of God as the primary focus of the mission of the church. An over-preoccupation with what the campaign headquarters looks like, with what relationships are like among the leaders, or with anything internal could subvert the very purpose of the headquarters — equipping the workers to go out into the world and be active and effective."

Beneath our images, of course, are important theological questions. What is the church? What is its primary purpose?

If we recall the message of Vatican II, we know that the church is, by definition, a religious institution whose purpose is to work toward bringing about the reign of God in the world. This purpose is the church's mission. This is its campaign.

The campaign starts in the headquarters, and it gets direction from the headquarters; but it can never be successful if the primary focus is placed on the internal workings of the headquarters.

A successful campaign is one in which the workers gather at the headquarters and then march out into the marketplace and the public square. They sell the product or the message. They go door to door. They organize others to join the campaign. They publicly proclaim the value of their message; and, when given the opportunity, they are willing to debate their competitors in a public forum.

This image suggested by Hinojosa is not a perfect one, but it does provide useful way of thinking about our basic purpose as a church. While internal church ministries are important, an excessive or exclusive emphasis on these internal affairs can lead us to neglect or weaken the very core of the church's mission — the mission of the laity to be the church in the world and to transform that world on behalf of God's reign.

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