



A Shepherd for the Flock

The Rebuilding of a Parish Community

By Morgan Smith

When I first spoke with Fr. Amal on the phone, I was struck by the life in his voice. Here is a man whom I have never met, but already he was treating me like a long-lost relative. When I asked him about the story of his parish, St. Joachim, he insisted (more than once) that I come to visit him and his parishioners in Marrero, Louisiana that weekend! When I told him that I did not have the money to travel, he insisted that I tell God I needed a ticket, and that God would provide me with a ticket—this is the kind of faith that his mother had taught him as a boy in India, he told me. “When you get the ticket, call me.” I got off the phone with a giddy smile on my face. This is the character of man and trust in God that was needed to bring a broken rural parish back to life—one who implicitly trusts in God to provide and puts Him in the center of everything.

Founding Mission

Marrero is a rural town outside of New Orleans—a swampy, wooded area, lined by the Bayou Des Familles and adjacent to Jean Lafitte National Park. Father Elford Wanke, who saw a need for a parish community in the developing town, founded St. Joachim

Parish in 1985. At the time, they were beginning oil exploration, and the prospect of a lot of jobs—and more people—allowed for the building of new houses and other developments. Fr. Wanke had a clear mission and vision for a parish rich in family and community—to have families and children at the center of parish life. The church itself started off in a shed, and then eventually a building called the “Family Life Center.”

The prospect of jobs in the area fell through, and it didn’t bring as many people as originally thought. In addition, Fr. Wanke died suddenly after only four or five years as the pastor, taking his vision and mission with him. The growing community went through a succession of pastors, but none of them had the steadfast vision of the founder. Eventually, the fledgling community divided into cliques and groups who fought against one another—they had

“Our parish family is the most welcoming to anyone who walks through our doors. The feeling of family greets each person and the spirit of God is within all. There is no greater spiritual experience than to celebrate God in such a natural habitat. No stranger enters the House of God at our church. The parish family opens its arms with love, kindness, support and spiritual enrichment. We are a small parish family that is deeply devoted to each other and most importantly the followings of our Lord and Savior. I often tell our Father Amal if we can have a person walk through the door they will enriched by our family.”

—Debbie Ipock



more power in the parish than the priests the Archdiocese would send to pastor them. In essence, they ran the parish for 25 years, did whatever they wanted and nobody touched them. No priest wanted to be assigned there, and the general idea was to close it down. To top everything off, Hurricane Katrina hit the area hard, and the church building was badly damaged. It had broken windows and doors and was falling into disrepair.

A Broken Parish

When Fr. Amal was assigned there, he was told that it had “a lot of potential.” He really had no idea what he was getting into! But, we are speaking about a man who was born in India, lived in China for many years and has a PhD in Entomology. I don’t imagine much scares him! When I asked him his first impression he remarked, “I wanted to build a church. But, I thought it best to wait and see what was needed.” What he saw almost immediately, was that what the parish really needed was community. They had been divided for so long and without pastoral care. They needed to be healed at the very center of their relationships and bring the worship of God back into the parish.

Fr. Amal looked for the founding pastor’s mission, because he saw that is what was lacking. If

there was some way to restore the original mission, then maybe the parish could be saved.

Fr. Amal learned about what the founder did founder did by studying his letters and talking to the people who knew him. His first year there, he had parishioners over for dinner on a constant basis—getting to know them and getting to know the parish through stories of the founding days. He set out to restore the original mission of the parish: family and community.

I asked Fr. Amal how he set out to build a community: “Say Mass every day. Be available to the people: to visit the sick, bury the dead, and for baptisms.” For five or six years Fr. Amal focused on these staples of Catholic life, and this started to bring the people together—united in the sacraments.

Rebuilding

The building was a major problem. There were problems paying the bills, and when trying to spend a little money to fix the windows, he was told to stop spending money. “There was no money to spend!” he vented to me on the phone. They said: “If you can’t pay the bills, then you will have to close.” He said with vigor: “I don’t give up easily!” Fr. Amal told God what he needed: to pay the bills.

His prayer was answered. Someone called him and made a

“What makes St. Joachim Church unique is our Priest, Fr. Amal, and the dedicated parishioners that come to worship our Lord there. We as parishioners are a close-knit community and consider all as a part of our family. With an active average attendance of only a hundred or so parishioners at each mass, we have been able to renovate our 30-year-old church into a marvelous house of worship at a cost of approximately one million dollars. A tremendous feat! We should be debt free in nine months.

Getting new parishioners is a challenge for Fr. Amal, but under his leadership the parish has grown and will continue to be a viable asset to our Lord. Fr. Amal never surrenders to defeat and instills in us the power of prayer and faith. His unselfishness and commitment to God and his parishioners is the motivating force for us to thrive to make St. Joachim a church for all people. His emphasis on youth activities and participation at Mass is a cornerstone for generations to come.”

—William A. Lazaro, Jr.

“St. Joachim has been home to my husband and I for many years. We worshiped at St. Joachim off and on for years before becoming registered parishioners in 2013. Before this we only attended one other Catholic Church. In both cases we attended mass and then went about our business. We were not involved in any ministries; that all changed for us with Father Amal. He learned I worked for a bank and asked me to be a member of the finance council. After awhile my husband and I were asked to be Eucharistic Ministers and to be on the pastoral council. We are now doing more than just attending mass we are part of the parish community. We look for opportunities to be more involved. The parishioners at St. Joachim genuinely care about each other and are willing to help each other when ever possible. Our parish community center has been renovated into a true place of worship. Together as a faith based community we were able to get our parishioners and other benefactors to help us pay for our renovations. With all of us being involved in the renovations, the parishioners feel as though they have true ownership in their church.

St. Joachim is nestled in the middle of the woods, which is why it has been nicknamed as “The Little Church in the Woods.” There are not many places where you can see alligators, deer, nutria, armadillos and various birds all while attending Mass. Our church and outdoor rosary walk are surrounded by breath taking scenery. God's beauty is all around us at St. Joachim!”

—Allison Griffen



proposal: if the community could raise \$15,000 for Christmas, then this person would match the \$15,000. They put up a poster asking for gifts. Everyone thought they couldn't do it, but they did, and the generous person matched it. Every year since then, they have raised about \$18,000. Fr. Amal says, "Money is not number one. You have to believe in God. God will provide."

A lot of people started to help. He said: "It was like a broken family being brought back together at one table." He broke up the powerful cliques by redistributing the different ministries amongst all of the parishioners—instead of the groups that had been in power. He told them to "be accountable for what you do" by inviting and involving everyone, not just their friends. He also spoke out against gossip. He said: "I am not a nice guy when it comes to these things!" and laughed joyfully.

Following the original mission of the parish, Fr. Amal welcomed babies and children to Mass. Intentionally, at St. Joachim, there is no cry room, and children are encouraged to come. "They make noise and walk around," he said with a laugh—I could almost see the smile on his face. There is a special children's liturgy where the children walk in procession with Fr. Amal. They have a special Liturgy of the Word and then come back to talk with Fr. Amal about what they learned.

Shepherd for the Flock

The beautiful beginnings of St. Joachim Parish—the Little Church in the Woods—was interrupted by the death of the founder, a strong leader with a clear mission and vision. The people lost their way and took matters into their own

hands—which led them astray. It is clear from this example that a parish needs a pastor who has a mission and is willing to lead, to wait patiently, and to fight when the time is right—and to trust that God will indeed provide. I asked Fr. Amal why a parish needs a solid pastor—a strong leader: "People need a shepherd, this is the way that Christ brought us. They need my presence and my guidance to bring them together. They need a moral presence."

Sometimes, just like Christ, this presence can be disturbing. Change is difficult, especially when the same people have been running a parish for so many years. Christ came to disturb our way to give us the gift of His own Way. When we follow Him, we are truly free and truly in communion with one another. Fr. Amal wants Christ to be at the center of his parish community. So he, as the parish priest—the shepherd—had to "disturb" in order to bring the sheepfold together to follow the Good Shepherd. St. Joachim finally has its original mission in tact: a close, welcoming, family-centered community that is grateful for the presence of a lively, tenacious, Indian priest who helped them rebuild.

"Fr. Amal had the vision for St. Joachim to have more ministries with many parishioners involved. If you haven't met Fr. Amal, you don't know that he's quite persuasive and helps people step out of their comfort zones when it comes to serving the Church. He definitely leaves his mark on the parishes where he serves. As our parish grew, so did the possibility of the much dreamed about renovations. Many parishioners stepped up to help with the planning of the new church and helping financially as much as they could. Today we have the newly renovated church, but we are not finished yet! Although we still have some bills to pay off along with some unexpected repairs to the AC and sewage system, we are keeping an eye on the future. We are hoping to build a Family Life Center, so more people will be able to come and see just how special our little slice of heaven really is. God's work is never done and neither is ours!"

—Christy Drachenberg

—Morgan Smith is the Director of Communication for Catholic Rural Life

Fr. Amal has written three books about his life and experiences as a parish priest: *Perfect Not Perfect*, *Quo Vadis: The Little Church in the Woods*, *Re-Making of a Faith Community: The Story of a Struggling Faith Community Re-made*. For information on how to obtain his books, contact him at amal2302@yahoo.com.