

Among Catholic parishes in the United States, St. Munchin and St. Aloysius are not top-heavy with bureaucracy. We have about 300 families and a few part-time staff members between us. In our diocese, the largest parishes have over 2000 families, and in other states, some parishes number over 5000.

No matter the size, a parish has to be careful not to make life too burdensome on its members. Engaged couples are sometimes wary about contacting the Catholic Church for a wedding, because of the hassle: they know that classes will be required, questions will be asked, and rules come into play. At the very moment when young couples rejoice in their future, some of them feel threatened by the bureaucracy of the church. The same may happen to the divorced and remarried, and to people wanting to become Catholic. We spend time with them, but some of them wonder why it takes so long and why it involves so much.

The Catholic Church has been around a long time, and over the centuries we have generated a lot of laws. Few people know what they all are, and fewer yet know why we have them.

Leaders of the church mean well, but sometimes our laws put people off more than they help. Through Jeremiah the prophet, God said, "Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture. I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which I have driven them and bring them back to their meadow. I will appoint shepherds for them so that they need no longer fear and tremble." At the time, God was condemning the bad kings of Israel, but clergy who lead parishes read these words with some fear and trembling ourselves. We want to be good shepherds, but sometimes we fail. We make things difficult for the engaged, for the inquirer, the penitent, the poor or the stranger. The bureaucracy in a parish like ours isn't as bad as it is in some other places, but I know we need to be careful not to make life difficult for people who just want to find God.

Today's prophecy warns any of us who are leaders in businesses or families. God doesn't want just any leaders. God wants good leaders. And God cares a lot for the followers. If the followers aren't getting what they need, Jeremiah says, God will replace the leaders. Each one of us acts as a good shepherd when we go the extra mile to take care of the flock God entrusts to us.