

May 14, 2017 Seven Homily: Brothers and sisters, for nearly eleven years I served the Catholic community of Frankfort, a small village in central New York. Once, in a homily, I teased the members of my congregation by asking them two questions. Question number one: How many Catholic shrines can be visited in our region? Answer: The Shrine of the North American Martyrs at Auriesville and the Turning Stone Casino in Verona. Question number two: Of the two shrines, which is the most popular with the members of our parish? Nervous laughter was the unspoken response. Frankfort is no different from all the others parishes I have served in the course of my priesthood. Gambling is popular in our culture. It is worth noting that in the world of gambling, numbers are of great importance. One thinks of the popular game of bingo as an example. But in the game of craps, the number seven is the one likely to make the gambler a winner. Games of chance rely on a little luck and some daring on the part of the player. No gambler can determine the outcome in advance.

You may be surprised to learn that the inspired biblical writers were very sensitive to the symbolism of numbers. The number "seven" is used 735 times in the bible. The number represents order and harmony, completion and perfection. There is a basic structure to the universe that can be traced back to the seven days of creation. Our universe is not the result of chance, but of the design of the God the creator. Our world reposes on reason.

In the vocabulary of our faith, "seven" is so often presented to the faithful. Consider: the seven last words of Christ, the seven sacraments, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven deadly sins, the seven virtues, the seven parts of the Lord's prayer and the seven day week.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that the first officials called by the leaders of the Jerusalem Church were known as "the seven". (Acts 6:1-7) They were called to a ministry of service (the meaning of the word "deacon".) Tellingly, all seven men had Greek names. They represented the Jewish Christians of the diaspora, who, at one time, lived outside Palestine, and now resided in Jerusalem. They were influenced by Greek culture and language. When the scriptures were proclaimed in their synagogues, Greek was the preferred language. Palestinian Jewish Christians, on the other hand, were the more established community, and their scriptures were read in Hebrew. Greek-speaking Jewish Christians complained of being slighted in the distribution of food to needy widows. "The Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution". (Acts 6:1) The leaders took the matter into their own hands and selected "seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom". (Acts 6:3) One of the men chosen was Stephen, the first Christian martyr. (Acts 7) What we gather from this brief reading is the initial organization of the Church of Christ.

One of the fiercest Critics of the Christian Church in Russia was the founder of the communist movement in that country, Vladimir Lenin. Although he held Christians in contempt, he had a grudging admiration for the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), St. Ignatius Loyola. He was impressed with the saint's unflagging zeal, his administrative ability and his charisma for attracting disciples to his society. Lenin truly believed if he had more men like the great saint, Communism would spread world-wide.

It should be obvious to the reader that without an efficient organization, the missionary work of the church is likely to suffer. Without order, you have chaos. We see in the Acts of the Apostles, the beginnings of the embryonic church and the unfolding of God's plan. The structure and organization of the Catholic Church has, throughout history, been found worthy of imitation.

If, at any time, you should hear the number seven, avoid mentioning B-7 (bingo) or the roll of the dice. Just recall why the number is so important in telling the story of the Christian faith. And remember "the seven" in today's first reading.

Amen!