

Local Business Benediction

by
Jonathan Massimi

In this COVID economy, some local businesses have been able to weather the storm, while others have been swept away by the waves. Even in a non-pandemic year, it's a tough go. This is something I learned from my hometown, where in 2012, the typical lifespan of a new business was two years. As a parish, we wanted to do something to help, so we started what came to be known as "Businesses We Love."

At the time, our parish was reconstructing its website. This was a period in my ministry where I was coming under the influence of John McKnight and the Asset Based Community Development approach. I started to take inventory of our parish's gifts and drew attention to the abundance in and around us. One of the items inventoried was the *gift of space*. In thinking about this category, my mind went to *virtual* space, and I asked, "how might we use our church website to support local businesses?" It was suggested that we create a "Businesses We Love" tab on our site, where monthly, we would feature a local business and encourage our people to patronize them, in the positive sense. Up until this point, we were in the habit of soliciting businesses for donations, typically items that could be auctioned at our annual church bazaar. This was different. We wanted to interact from a position of abundance, not scarcity.

Every month we invited people from the congregation to nominate a local business, then we'd vote. Once selected, I would visit the business with a certificate acknowledging that they were a "Business We Loved" along with a gift from another local business. I would then offer a blessing. This blessing wasn't some magical hand waving in a local shop. This was a benediction. Benediction is the Latin form of the word "blessing," which means "to say (*dicere*) good things(*bene*)."

I thank Henri Nouwen for reminding me of this. Through my words I intentionally called out the gifts present in the owners and staff. I prayed that their gifts would be used for the good of others. I spoke *good things*. Here is what happened.

By presenting the celebrated business with a gift from another local business, a network started to emerge where owners would connect and purchase items or services from each other. In addition, in their desire to do good, businesses would reach out to us with ideas and together we would work to implement them. Ideas such as Saturday night dinners for the community, coffee houses where street involved individuals would perform, the giving of business attire to women preparing for job interviews, a co-working space in the Parish Hall, and so on and so on. The gifts of local business owners, the gifts of the parish, the gifts of

neighbours, were brought into association, were amplified, and the community was strengthened because of it. Here is what I learned.

People are good. Within us there is an inclination to use our gifts to benefit others.
Businesses stimulate economy. Here I am not simply speaking of dollars and cents. I am referring to the gift economy. Based on my experience, local businesses don't simply sell goods, but also have the gifts and willingness to do good. Owners and staff have gifts, skills and interests they wish to reveal. *Words matter.* In speaking good things about others, that which was once hidden was brought to the surface. Peoples gifts were recognized, celebrated, and called into action. In all, good words, led to good things.