

CrossCurrents A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times

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Like the Air We Breathe

I got a shock last week when I found myself delivering a series of talks on the theme “Parish.” Suddenly I realized that I had never spoken on this topic before – in 35 years devoted to parish work!

If I had really been paying attention, the irony should not have surprised me at all. So what if I tended to take “Parish” for granted, even though it has been the focus of my entire professional career? *Church teaching* also takes “Parish” for granted. *Canon Law* takes “Parish” for granted. So do most Catholics -- until someone tries to close *their* parish!

I’m not talking here about our church buildings. People made great sacrifices to build them and take great pleasure in using them. Nor am I talking about the identity of *individual* parishes. Obviously, Catholics have often invested great pride in their own parish’s schools, teams, and successes – especially wherever one’s parish came to represent community rivalries or ethnic solidarity.

No, I am talking about the phenomenon of “Parish” in general: the entity, the “thing” that has been the basis for normal day-to-day Catholic living for nearly all Catholics. If Tip O’Neill said all politics is local, we could say that all Catholic life is “Parish.”

The irony is that, for hundreds of millions of Catholics worldwide, “Parish” is like the air we breathe: we hardly ever notice it – unless we’re deprived of it.

Parish has become indispensable to Catholic life – but it wasn’t always like that. During Christianity’s earliest centuries, there were no parishes at all—or priests either!

The shepherd of any flock was the local bishop, who taught and administered sacraments and liturgy throughout his diocese in collaboration with the council of *presbyters* that

elected him and the *deacons* who served under him. This system thrived for more than 300 years.

In the fourth century things began to change, as dioceses grew so big that bishops could not reach all their people. This pastoral challenge triggered a bureaucratic solution. Over the next two centuries, dioceses began sub-dividing into smaller, more local communities. These were the first “parishes,” and the ministers who emerged to be their shepherds in place of bishops were the first parish priests. So 21st century Catholics have inherited a system of local life that dates back about 1500 years.

Ironically, the term “parish” in Greek meant “immigrate,” “sojourn as an alien.” The Old Testament used it to mean “exile” or “immigrant,” often referring to the people of Israel, as in Psalm 39:

*What am I in thy sight but a **passerby**, a **sojourner**, as all my fathers were?*

In the New Testament, the term refers to two things: first, Israel’s sojourn as exiles in Egypt, away from their own land:

*The God of our nation Israel chose our ancestors, and made our people great when they were **living as foreigners** in Egypt. – (Acts 13:70)*

Second, the term was also used for our human life on earth, since our true permanent home is with God:

*If you are acknowledging as your Father one who has no favorites and judges everyone according to what he has done, you must be scrupulously careful as long as you are **living away from your home**.-- (1 Peter 1:17)*

Originally, then, “parish” was where we pitched our tents while waiting for the Redeemer to rescue us. As centuries passed and earthly life endured, however, the term “parish” took on new meaning.

Though once applied to the people and the community, it came to mean the “territory” one lived in – our “homeland” rather than our place of “exile. “Parish” as territory even got applied to civil districts: Louisiana, for example, still has parishes instead of counties!

Thus the idea of homelessness got replaced by a permanent institution. More and more, that institution – or

even just its church building – came to represent “Church” to people, as if the bishop, the people, and the community mattered less than a “house of God” where one could go to visit Christ.

Canon Law reinforced this misconception by defining parish in terms of (1) territory, (2) the office of pastor, and (3) the “benefice” (fringe benefits) he received while running the parish. Catholics were required to worship at the church of the territory they lived in. Parish life became all many people ever knew of Catholicism, and the pastor became their sole hierarchy.

In a word, parish was a huge success, for it evolved into the local branch office of what had become the world’s largest organization. But that success had robbed parish of most of its original meaning.

Vatican II (1962-1965) acted to fix that. Its focus on the “Pilgrim Church” and “People of God” de-emphasized the institutional aspects, making *territories* less important than *communities*, making *buildings* less important than *belonging*, *population* less important than *people*, and the pastor’s *office* less important than his role as *shepherd*.

Within twenty years, Canon Law (revised in 1983) reflected this change, by redefining parish and by freeing Catholics to worship at any parish, whether or not they lived in its territory. That same period since Vatican II saw dramatic changes in the dynamics of parish life as well.

First, Catholics were no longer hard-wired to jump whenever pastors pushed their buttons labeled *guilt*, *fear*, *obligation*, or *duty*! This was essentially a good thing – adults for far too long had been regarded as and treated as children within the Church. But no organization can operate if its leaders cannot motivate its members. Few pastors regret losing the old way of motivating Catholics—yet most are still struggling to develop new motivational techniques that work as well as the old ones did!

Second, clergy shifted, as priestly ordinations declined even while the Church restored its deacons. Now many parishes have more deacons than priests, and thus resemble the early centuries of parish life more than anything else since then.

Third, the labor force shifted as laypeople flooded the ranks of parish ministry. As early as 1970, thousands of Catholics entered graduate theological studies, often unprompted by anyone else. First in religious education, then in youth ministry, liturgy and music, evangelization, and parish management, they filled the gap left by fewer priests. By 2005, for the first time in history, laypeople in parish work out-number priests, who had become a minority among parish leaders.

Fourth, this brought dramatic changes in parish ministry itself. Gone was the “drill team” model, where two or more priests wore the same uniform, brought the same skills from the same training to perform the same jobs while living the same lifestyles. Now “ministry” meant teamwork of a new kind, more like a ball club, with teammates bringing diverse and specialized skills from different training and different schools, and where team play required not identical lockstep uniformity but complementary efforts and mutual support.

Fifth, 85% of the new teammates were women!

All these changes, added up, yield a startling result: after 15 centuries of running local Church one way, “parish” is being radically transformed in a single generation ! It does not take rocket science to realize that such change has no precedent not only in the church, but in all of human history.

It is no surprise, then, that parish life is struggling to find a new equilibrium. The challenges are many: attendance is down, revenue is down, volunteerism is down, populations are aging—and the effects of priestly scandal, hierarchical mismanagement, and parish closings just make the challenges tougher to address.

It is tempting to seek another way to live our faith day by day. So personal parishes and house churches and campus ministries and intentional communities all attract motivated Catholics. But none of them can reach more than a small number of Catholics; parish remains the only way to reach 90% of our people.

Catholicism was able to thrive without parish for centuries, but now parish has become indispensable. It is where the rubber hits the road, it is where “Church” actually happens – or not. Besides being the branch office of the

world's largest organization and the most complex local institution in American society, it has become the spiritual home of the overwhelming majority of Catholics. If parish disappeared, we would probably have to reinvent it.

The inescapable conclusion: if parish life is jeopardized, we must revive it, renew it, re-energize it. The challenge is not unlike the challenge posed by our jeopardized environment. We may not be happy with the condition of the air we are forced to breathe, but we cannot live without it. The same goes for parish.

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