

The Parish, the Priest, the Parishioner & their Future

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My task this morning is to provide a big picture, that is, a context and some data for our discernment these days. So, I will use the title of the conference as an outline, and look at what is happening to Parishes, then Priests, and then Parishioners.

There is a lot of statistical material here, so I'm going to suggest that you focus on the larger picture, the implications, rather than the specifics. It will help, and you will be able to go back and recover the statistics if you need them later.

I will begin by looking at some of the larger cultural changes we have experienced in our society in the last 50 years. Then, I will point to Vatican II, a major event in the church which has affected all of us. After that, I will turn to sociological data about trends in parishes, priests and parish leadership, and in our Catholic population. In particular, I will focus on generational differences and some data on racial and ethnic diversity. At the end, I will suggest what I think are the key issues facing us as Catholics who want to work together to create our shared future.

But first, a word about my work at the National Pastoral Life Center. As a center, we have done two studies on parishes for the USCCB and are presently conducting a third. David DeLambo, our lead sociologist, and Mary Gautier of CARA have offered me invaluable help in putting this presentation together. I acknowledge their help and thank them. David also tutored me in powerpoint!

At the NPLC I am the coordinator of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative begun by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago just before his death in 1996. The Initiative began with the cardinal's concern about growing polarization in parishes. Its focus is to bring Catholics who seem polarized into dialogue with one another on divisive issues. When the cardinal announced the Initiative, he released a statement, *Called to Be Catholic*, which opens with a question:

“Will the Catholic Church in the United States enter the new millennium as a church of promise, augmented by the faith of rising generations and able to be a leavening force in our culture? Or will it become a church on the defensive, torn by dissension and weakened in its core structures?”

I believe the statement, written in 1996, is prescient. Part I states the problem; Part II identifies some issues; Parts III and IV make the case for dialogue as a response. But the point of recalling *Called to Be Catholic* is to support what many commentators agree on, the crisis in the church is not just the sexual abuse crisis. A better image is this: the tinder was ready and it was ignited by the sexual abuse crisis. So, I bring to this gathering—for what it is worth—eight years of listening hard to what is happening in our church and, at the end, I will share with you some of my thoughts about the way forward.

Let's begin by thinking for a moment about some of the cultural factors that are affecting us, because, we, as Catholics, are not living in isolation from our culture. I have selected

just four developments that have had enormous impact on our ways of being in the world. Let's first consider some scientific advances. At the macro level, many of us can recall the impact, in July 1969, of looking at the earth for the first time from the moon. Whether we articulated it at the time or not, we understood in a new way that we may not be the center of the cosmos. And, in the years since, we have experienced continuing, thrilling revelations about that cosmos—its origins, its enormity, and the possibility of life outside of us no longer seem like the “stuff” of science fiction. At the other end of the spectrum, we have exploration of the micro world, from the splitting of the atom to the mapping of the genome. The difference between our DNA and that of a mouse is very small! Increasingly, we understand that we are connected to the natural world in profound ways.

Another development is our experience of religious diversity. Do you remember when the sociologist of religion Will Herberg could write a book called *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1960) and we could believe he had described the religious spectrum in America? Now we work with, live near, have as friends, very good people whose beliefs are different from ours. It is increasingly difficult for many educated Catholics to believe that all truth is only in the Catholic Church. And, in fact, Vatican II acknowledged that there are “seeds of faith” in other religions. For almost 50 years now, we have had both official and unofficial interfaith and ecumenical dialogues. Now, 50% of young adult Catholics marry non-Catholics. Almost all of our personal, family lives, have been touched by these changes. Indeed, we live in a radically different religious world from that of the 50's.

The first wave of the sexual revolution between 1960 and 1965 was “to give women the freedom that men had always enjoyed.” Contraception and the debates around it changed all our lives, women and men, Catholic and non-Catholic. At the same time, the women's movement began to hammer at the glass ceiling in corporate America. As late as 1968 it was not uncommon for large firms to have explicit policies that no woman could be a partner. Every Catholic Common Ground Initiative conference, no matter what the topic, ends up saying: “The church won't solve this issue until it figures out what to do with women.”

A descriptive catchall phrase, “postmodernity” refers to what has come after the Modern Era. A realization that scientific advances, for example the splitting of the atom, could have a shadow side, and gradual criticism of the modern world's belief in the possibility of unlimited progress, are two of the things that have led to a breakdown confidence in the perspectives of the Modern Era. One aspect of the change is that confidence in institutions has been shaken. The postmodern attitude can be seen in the shrug—“whatever,” or “Well, that's your opinion and I have mine and that's OK.” Some of our contemporaries hold there is no universal truth or absolute truth, or at least no possibility of knowing it. We are all affected by this, whether we like it or not. Some react by refusing to question and reasserting an old world view, others by throwing out everything old in favor of relativism or nihilism. “Is there any meaning after all?” they ask. “Are there any overarching stories—including the Christian story—which bear universal truth?”

This has enormous implications for authority—who is right? Who knows? In the church, the issuance of *Humanae vitae* and the ensuing contraception debate was a watershed moment, not only for the teaching about sexuality, but also for the fallout effect on church authority. For the first time, many Catholics turned to Vatican II's affirmation of freedom of conscience and disagreed with an authoritative teaching. And, despite Henny Penny, the sky didn't fall in. In my view, one of the most serious consequences of the recent crisis has been the continuing damage inflicted on the church's moral authority in the private and public realms.

Unquestionably, the Second Vatican Council was a watershed moment, one especially captured in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, which was addressed to all people and begins: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men & women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts." (n.1)

Some theologians today would say that the church, which was still inhabiting a medieval world (of kings and lords and absolute hierarchical order), began at Vatican II to establish a rapprochement with the modern world of science and belief in Reason and Progress, just as that modern world was breaking up and becoming what is called the post-modern world, the world of the shrug. We will be celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the closing of the council a year from now. And we have all lived through this period of enormous change.

PARISH

With that long introduction, let's turn to the first topic in our title: the Parish. Let's begin by touching into our memory and imagination: What was the parish you attended as a child like? Was it big or small? Rural or urban? Did it have a school? Did you go to that school or were you a "public"? What did the church building look like? How many priests were there? How many Masses were celebrated on a weekend? Did your family attend social events at the parish?

Now, do the same imaginative exercise for your present parish.

I wanted to begin by raising our own parish experience to consciousness because, for all of us, our actual experience of parish life is foundational. But it is also crucially important for our purposes these days to realize that our individual experience is also always partial.

C. Wright Mills, in *The Sociological Imagination*, wrote that most people do not have a sociological imagination, that is, the ability to see biography (i.e., one's own personal experience) in the context of larger social forces and trends. Yet, we understand who we are and what we face better when we see the big picture. And so, with a lot of help from my sociologist friends, especially Mary Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and Dr. David DeLambo, of the Diocese of Cleveland, I have gathered some information about trends in parish, priests, and people. I hope that it will help us to reflect on the effects these changes are having on us personally and on parish life in the United States.

The extraordinary growth in the number of parishes between 1900 and 1995, from just under 6500 to more than 19,000, reveals the growth in the Catholic population and the development of the great infrastructure that most of us think of as normative. The NPLC studies in 1990 and 1997 showed that the downturn in the total number of parishes began between 1992 and 1993. By 1997, 17% of parishes surveyed had experienced some consolidation.

Statistics reported by CARA from the Official Catholic Directory show a steady loss in the number of parishes in the last 10 years. Closings and mergings of parishes, which began in the midwest and west, is now happening at a greater pace than is the founding of parishes in newly populated areas. We know that Boston and New York are among the dioceses in the process of restructuring parishes and we can expect the number of parishes to continue to decrease, even though the Catholic population continues to increase. These consolidations are driven not only by changing demographics, i.e. Catholics moving out of old cities into suburbs, but also by the decreasing numbers of priests available to lead them.

U.S. parishes without a resident priest have gone from 549 in 1965 (the end of the Vatican Council) to 3,157 in 2004. Also, in many places, parish size is increasing. There are dioceses that have set policies that any new church building must accommodate at least 500 (or even more) parishioners. Think for a moment how different the experience of a very large worship space is from that of a smaller place.

Priests

This brings us to our second major topic—Priests. In 1969 there were nearly 60,000 priests in the United States. At present, there are about 43,000 priests, a decline of nearly 30 percent. Out of these, two-thirds are diocesan priests, while the others are priests in religious orders who may or may not be active in parish ministry. Of these 29,000 diocesan priests, fewer than three-quarters are currently active in ministry, reducing the total number of active, diocesan priests to 19,645.

What this means is fewer, and as we will see, older, priests are available for parish work. Most obviously, overworked priests are often living alone and some are responsible for multiple parishes. I know of one pastor in a rural area who has seven parishes! Even before the sex abuse crisis, people were talking about the crisis in the priesthood.

Lay Ecclesial Ministers

I now want to turn to an emerging category of parish leader, the Lay Ecclesial Minister, the subject of our NPLC studies for the bishops' conference in 1990 and 1997. We are currently analyzing the 2004 survey results to update it once again. For the purposes of this study, the definition of a Lay Ecclesial Minister is a non-ordained person who is employed in a paid pastoral position in a parish for 20 hours or more a week.

We asked respondents not to include teachers or principals in parish schools, secretaries, or business managers as lay ecclesial ministers. However, the returns in our current tell us that it is more and more difficult to make these distinctions. For example, many parish

business managers are receiving pastoral ministry training and, more and more, see at least part of their work as pastoral ministry.

Also, we recognize that parish secretaries are actually integral to many pastoral staffs. There are even instances where the secretary runs the parish with a pastor who is only part-time and there is no other pastoral minister on staff. This definition also overlooks the unpaid volunteers serving in pastoral positions. These, too, are in fact, ecclesial lay ministers.

We don't have the same hard numbers for Lay Ecclesial Ministers that we have for priests, deacons, or religious, but recent studies by the NPLC and CARA estimate that there were over 21,000 LEM's in the US in 1990, just under 30,000 by 1997, and well over 30,000 by 2004. In addition, CARA reports that more than 20,000 lay people were enrolled in ministry formation programs in 2004.

You will remember that we had under 20,000 (19,645) active diocesan priests in 2002; and now we see that we have more than 30,000 Lay Ecclesial Ministers.

We also know that the percentage of parishes with lay parish ministers is rising. Presently, about two-thirds (67%) of parishes have paid lay parish ministers working at least 20 hours per week on staff, versus 63% in 1997 and 54% in 1990. When including volunteers, the current percentage of parishes with lay parish ministers is about 70%.

These statistics lead to some stunning conclusions. They make clear that in 1990 parish ministry was performed predominantly by priests but, by 1997, parish ministry in the U.S. was being performed predominantly by laity. The change is both major and rapid. The growth of Lay Ecclesial Ministers and the dramatic decline in the number of priests are no longer anticipated realities. They are today's realities!

We can summarize the shifting leadership patterns in our parishes by thinking about the situation in 1965, at the end of Vatican II, when there were no permanent deacons or lay ecclesial ministers. Now, the almost 15,000 permanent deacons and more than 30,000 lay ministers are a most significant source of parish leadership.

The Subcommittee on the Laity from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has been working hard to think through the very important issues of vocation, recruitment, formation, certification, and compensation, for this new group of parish leaders. They have been consulting widely and are working on a draft document to be presented to the conference next year.

Age of Ministers

Another factor impacting ministry is the age distribution in each of these groups. The median age of Lay Ecclesial Ministers rose from 45 to 47 between the years 1990 and 1997. CARA says the average age of LEM's had risen to 52 by the time of their 2002 study. CARA's 2004 Catholic Ministry Formation Directory reports that 74% of laity enrolled in ministry programs are over age 40.

In those same years, the median age of pastors dropped 4 years. While this seems surprising at first sight, the drop in the median age of pastors means that priests are being given pastorates at a younger age. And so, this statistic also reflects the shortage of priests. Currently, 22% of pastors are over age 60, but pastors range between age 32 and 83.

The People

Having looked at parishes and parish leaders, let's turn to the Catholic population. Catholic adults today are almost evenly divided between those born before Vatican II and those born since Vatican II. For our Catholic research purposes, we frequently discuss generational differences according to these four categories. The Pre-Vatican II generation (World War II and Silent), born in 1946 or before, are age 58 and over in 2004. They are 19 percent of Catholic adults. The Vatican II generation (Baby Boomers), born between 1947 and 1960, age 44 to 57 in 2004, represent 28 percent of Catholics. The Post-Vatican II generation (Generation X, Young Adults), born between 1961 and 1973, age 31 to 43 in 2004, are 31 percent of Catholics in 2004. And the Post-Vatican II generation (Generation Y, Millennial, College and Post-College), born between 1974 and 1986, age 18 to 30 in 2004, are 22 percent of Catholics in 2004.

Note that more than 50% of adult Catholics today were born after 1961.

Mass Attendance

Mass Attendance is a traditional measure of Catholic identity. The NPLC study shows that between 1990 and 1997, parish registrations increased by 6%, while Mass Attendance went down by 6%. What does the fact that registrations are up and attendance down mean? Some possible factors are (1) People want to maintain some connection to the church, if for no other reason than maintaining their sacramental rights when weddings and baptisms come up. (2) Some may be moving from a spirituality associated with an institutional religion to a spirituality of seeking. ("I'm spiritual but not religious.") This is a different sense of what it means to be Catholic. The broad cultural trends described in *Bowling Alone* by Robert D. Putnam may shed light on this. He claims that Americans are increasingly disengaged, not only from the public sphere, but from formal and private sector relations and that virtually all leisure activities that involve doing something with someone else, from playing volleyball to playing chamber music, are declining.

Some light is shed on the question when we compare Mass attendance figures by generation. Sixty-one percent of the pre-Vatican II generation attend Mass weekly, while only 17% of the Post Vatican II (18-30) group say they attend Mass weekly or more. Clearly, for the Pre-Vatican II group, being Catholic involves regular, weekly Mass attendance, while for the Post-Vatican II generation it does not.

A younger Catholic pointed out, however, that if you look at the totals of those who say they attend weekly and those who attend less than weekly but often, 75% of the youngest group would be included. So, it may be that it is the regular, weekly attendance that is at issue, not the importance of the Eucharist itself.

When this information is put together with the information about parish registration, a new profile of the 50% of self-identified Catholics who were born after 1961 begins to emerge. They tend to register in parishes, attend Mass often but not weekly, and to consider themselves good Catholics.

Race and Ethnicity

Now we turn to looking at the Catholic population in terms of race and ethnicity. Much of Catholic population growth in the latter half of the twentieth century has been through immigration from other Catholic populations around the world. Therefore, the Catholic population is now quite ethnically and racially diverse. Today, only about two-thirds of U.S. Catholic adults are white, non-Hispanic. Nearly three in ten are Hispanic or Latino, about four percent are African American, two percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and one percent are Native American.

When we look at this racial and ethnic information using the same generational categories that we looked at for parish registration and Mass attendance, we see clearly how the church in the United States is rapidly changing and becoming more ethnically diverse.

In the Pre-Vatican II group (World War II and Silent), almost 90 percent of Catholics are white, non-Hispanic, with one percent each of Native Americans and Asians, and the rest Hispanic. In the next cohort, the Vatican II Baby Boomers, we see a slight increase (4%) in Hispanics and a comparable decline in whites. A significant change occurs when we consider the Post-Vatican II (Generation X, Young Adults) cohort in which the white group has dropped to under 70%, Hispanics have risen to almost a quarter of the population, and Asians have risen from one to three percent. The trend continues into the next group, college-age youth (Generation Y, Millennial, Jubilee) where just over half are white, non-Hispanic, the Native American and Asian percentages are unchanged, but Hispanics have risen to just under 40% of the Catholic population.

Now, putting some of this information together, we see that the Catholic population today looks radically different from the priest population that serves it.

Priests are much older on average and less ethnically diverse (93% white) than the people they serve. Seminarians, on the other hand, who are 66% white, 14% Hispanic, 5% African American, 13% Asian, and 3% Native American, reflect much more closely the racial and ethnic composition of the present Catholic population. The differences between Hispanic/Latino numbers for seminarians and the disproportionate number of Asian/Pacific Islander seminarians in relationship to Catholic population are noteworthy. It means, at the very least, that the burgeoning Hispanic population will continue to be underserved by Hispanic priests in the foreseeable future. These numbers also show that the priest shortage is, and will continue to be, experienced even more severely among non-white Catholic groups.

From the point of view of the priests, these statistics also show that most of the priests who are available for ministry now grew up in a very different church and sometimes

have a difficult time, linguistically and culturally, trying to connect with their communities.

Conclusions

We can now summarize some of what we have found in this brief survey.

Cultural shifts in society are impacting parish life

Changes in the church are impacting parish life

Parish ministry now has more lay leaders than priests & indications are that that trend will continue into the future

Parish ministers (priests and lay ecclesial ministers) are significantly older than the Catholic population

Parish ministers (priests and lay ecclesial ministers) are significantly less diverse than the Catholic population

We could add to these demographics the increasing educational level of many Catholics, their acceptance into the American mainstream, the move from cities to suburbs, the changing size of parishes, and so on.

Reviewing these trends, we find support for our thesis that the crisis we are facing as a church is not simply the result of the recent awareness of clergy sexual abuse of children.

We have been in a period of rapid change in society and in church for 50 years and the crisis has been brewing for some time. Again, a better image is that the crisis was the match that lit the tinder that was already present.

Now, I would like to suggest, from my work at the National Pastoral Life Center and with the Initiative, that the three major issues facing us as church are these:

BELONGING

One poignant comment from our dialogue with Young Adult Catholics a few years ago, stays with me. It was made by a young woman from a strong Catholic family who was a post-graduate student at Columbia University in NY. She asked, “How can I get into the church?” It’s a question that my pre-Vatican II generation hardly understands, but I believe that it holds a key to the future and that understanding it is crucial to the work we have set out to do these days. It reveals an understanding of church that is relational more than institutional. In this view, being baptized is an essential pre-requisite for participation in parish life, but it is not enough.

A friend of mine, a deeply religious and highly educated Christian, who converted to Catholicism, recently said to me, “I’m convinced you can’t convert to Catholicism.” His comment, which initially shocked me, was similar to that of the young woman I mentioned—you can’t get in. Of course, he is speaking about issues of culture and relationship.

MEANING

David DeLambo notes a dramatic increase in the number of parishes that say they have mission statements. That is a new development and it reflects an intentionality now that never existed before in parish life. A key issue for many younger Catholics is “Why should I belong?” When the question is probed further, their answers reveal the importance of sacramental worship that connects to their lives, communal relationships

(often fostered by being invited to assume some leadership responsibility), and an explicit concern for issues of social justice.

IDENTITY

The first two issues, belonging and meaning, lead to questions of identity. “What does it mean to be a Catholic? How do I know that I am a Catholic?”

In our Catholic Common Ground Initiative annual lecture at Catholic University in June, John Allen, the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter, said, “I would assert that the strongest single impulse in the Christian community pivots in identity—the desire for a robust assertion of what it means to be a Christian. . . .It is perhaps most strongly felt by younger generations whose members did not acquire a strong sense of identity either in the home or in school, even Catholic schools.” And he was speaking for the global church.

All of this means that parish life will be significantly different in the future. That it must be significantly different in the future.

Finally, I believe that the way to forge the future is to focus on our core identity as those who are baptized into Jesus Christ, who become through Word and Water the Body of Christ, and who are called therefore to live the life of Jesus Christ for our world. In a word, MISSION.

If we care about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, if we believe that God’s Spirit works through the deepest desires implanted in human hearts, if we take seriously our call to proclaim the coming of the reign of God, and our belief that God wishes all people to come to happiness and to eternal life, we must attend to the Word, listen to those desires, and together find new ways to make our parishes vibrant communities of worship and life for all of us and for succeeding generations.