Rethinking the Urban Parish in Light of The New Catholicity

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Three Catholic families head to their parish in the heart of a New England city to attend Sunday Mass and meet with friends and relatives at church. They all share a weekly ritual that not only gives them a sense of being part of a larger faith community, but also shapes their lives.

The O'Gradys have been part of the community for the longest time. Their fore-parents built the church with their own hands as they laid brick after brick to erect a monumental building that soon they named, faithful to their Irish tradition, St. Patrick parish. Approaching the church building one can see the pride in the older couple's faces because this is their church and these are the people whom they've known since they were young. They know most of their friends by name. Their three young adult daughters went to the parish school, but they seem not to be as committed to the love and care of the church as their parents and grandparents were at their age. The couple was married in this church and hopes to have their farewell Mass in the same place where they were baptized. This is their parish because they built it, because this is the only parish they know as theirs, and because there they find a family. They care jealously about it because this parish is their community.

The Rodriguezes migrated from the Dominican Republic in the 1980s in search of better opportunities and have lived in the city for almost two decades. They

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attend Mass in Spanish because that is the language in which they first learned how to communicate with God. The children are bilingual and wouldn't mind attending Mass in English, but they would rather go to the Mass in Spanish to be with their parents. For them this parish is a place to meet with God and others in a way that resembles the religious expressions of their native land. The parish first reached out to them because of the increasing number of Spanish-speaking Catholics in the area (70% of the total population of the city!) and then made a permanent niche for them. This is their parish. Though they still have not developed the full sense of ownership of those parishioners who have been in the parish for several generations, St. Patrick parish is their community.

The Nguyens migrated a few years ago from Vietnam. They only celebrate Sunday Mass in their native language twice a month because there are not enough priests to do so on a more regular basis. Their cultural traditions and the way they celebrate their Catholic experience reveal a deep commitment to their faith convictions. In Vietnam they were a religious minority and such a circumstance helped them to become more aware of the struggles to witness the Christian faith in the midst of multiple religious and secular traditions—some of them hostile toward Christianity. Because of sharp variances in the Vietnamese language and the difficulty for non-Vietnamese speakers to learn it, the older members interact less with other groups within the parish, but their children adapt faster to the English-speaking community. When this family approaches the church they know that they are welcomed to celebrate the same faith as other groups in the community along with the richness of their own cultural tradition. They may not be as visible as the other groups in terms of numbers, but St. Patrick truly is their community.

The sociological landscape of most urban cities in the United States has changed dramatically in the last four decades. As the city changes, so does the face of the parish—and also, I argue, its theological significance. This is not a new phenomenon in a country that is often reshaped by continuous waves of immigration; yet it is a reality that invites theologians and ministers to rethink the way we understand the urban parish. The three families described in the above vignette also belong to clearly defined cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups that together form a larger community: the parish. For all three groups the parish is their intentional community of faith. In this essay I propose to reflect as a practical theologian on the meaning, challenges, and implications of belonging to and worshiping in parishes that are culturally diverse. I draw on Robert Schreiters’ understanding of The New Catholicity as a frame to guide this reflection.

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Defining the Parish: Two Perspectives

Frequently one hears that a parish offers services and liturgies in different languages. Also one hears that a parish serves a number of ethnic groups. Such phrasing discloses an understanding of the parish as an unchangeable, static, and final unit. Thus, the parish offers a series of already defined services for an already defined clientele. Why should there be any differences among parishes? A too literal reading of canon 515.1 in the Code of Canon Law may give the wrong impression: “A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church.” Such a juridical definition argues for the stability of the parish as a legal entity within the organizational structure of the church, but does not say that the parish must be understood in monadic terms. If the parish is this unchangeable, static, and final unit, then the experience of any newcomer is not expected to contribute much to its definition. Much less if these newcomers speak a different language and worship by means of practices that, for those already established, are too “culturally diverse.”

Parishes constituted by worshiping communities from different ethnicities and various language groups are a common reality in most urban centers. A parish in these contexts can be best defined as a community of communities. The parish as community of communities demands a more dynamic reflection about its nature and mission because its identity is continuously adjusting. Though all groups that join the territorial entity called parish do so to share their experience of what it means to be a Catholic Christian, they also bring with them a number of needs and expectations that constantly reshape the nature and mission of the parish. It is possible that at some point the urban parish may focus on preserving the cultural and linguistic identity of a group (or groups), but later it may shift its efforts to deal with the social challenges that its new members confront. Furthermore, the same parish may later have to invest in developing structures of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue to respond to the fragmentation of the religious experience of the families that constitute it. Finally, the same community of communities may need to become a missionary parish that reaches out to a new audience, especially younger families, because its aging population does not guarantee future survival. Thus, the nature and mission of the parish are constantly redefined by the changing circumstances that shape the lives of its members, the presence of newcomers, the diversity of its members, and the emerging needs and expectations that all the parishioners share in common.

Insights from History: The Catholic Parish in the U.S.

From the very first moments of their presence in the United States parochial organization played a key role in shaping the experience of Catholics in the country. Historically it is possible to identify various organizational arrangements
that preceded, resembled, and eventually grounded the parish as the juridical unit that we have today. Since the establishment of the Nombre de Dios Mission at St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565, also considered the first Catholic parish in the continental territory (Hennessey, 11), various circumstances in the life of the church in the U.S. have shaped the idea of the parish. A close look at these circumstances reveals that the understanding of the nature and mission of the parish has rather evolved as a process of adaptation to the most immediate needs and expectations of its members.

Notwithstanding the shadows of colonialism, the Jesuit and Franciscan missions in the Southwest, to cite only two examples, illustrate how the organization of Catholic faith communities in the sixteenth century responded to the most immediate needs of the indigenous peoples. Despite the shortcomings of these efforts, positively the missions were centers of education, occupational training, religious instruction, cultural preservation, and protection from political and social movements that eventually devastated the native population.

With the arrival of millions of Catholics, mainly from Western Europe, right after the United States became an independent nation in the eighteenth century, new models of parish organization were necessary to respond to the needs and expectations of these newcomers. The lack of an adequate number of bishops and priests to serve the exploding Catholic population in the early part of the nineteenth century, coupled with a number of official laws that limited the expansion of Catholic structures, motivated the laity to take the initiative to buy land and build churches. Most parishes were initially established under boards of trustees whose members were mainly laypeople. These boards of trustees not only owned the church buildings, but also exercised some power in the day to day decisions of the parish—often providing catechetical and prayer services (Coriden, 36) and occasionally determining the appointment of priests (Dolan, 1:18). By the time of the First Council of Baltimore in 1884, the body of bishops of the United States agreed and enforced that parish property belonged to the dioceses, not the trustees. Gradually, in the nineteenth century the parish basically became the central neighborhood institution, thus making it possible for Catholics to shape an identity as a more defined community (Dolan, 1:3).

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National parishes in turn responded to another set of needs and expectations. Not bound by territorial limits, they were organized to serve Catholics who shared a common language and ethnicity, often the same nationality. Many of these parishes opened their own schools and cultivated ethnic pride. They functioned almost as independent units, though under the oversight of a pastor and the bishop. After the decline of the immigration flow from Western Europe, most Catholics in the country became more “Americanized.” English became the common language, most joined the mainstream culture, and the majority of national parishes have either been merged with others or closed after their raison d’être ceased to exist.

For many communities culture has been and continues to be a vital element to define their identity. Parishes in Mexican-American neighborhoods have maintained English and Spanish as concomitant languages for worship. Culturally, they live a mestizaje that discloses the richness of belonging to two cultures: Hispanic and U.S.-American (Elizondo, 26). Parishes in the Southwest are incessantly renewed by a constant flow of Catholics from both cultures thus forcing these communities to rethink their action as new members make their needs and expectations known. But such phenomenon is not limited to the Southwest. Thousands of Catholic parishes across the United States, many resembling St. Patrick parish in the New England city described at the beginning of this essay, are currently responding to the needs and expectations of culturally diverse groups that come together to worship in their churches. Though this trend is more evident in urban settings, the whole church is in a process of transformation.

This can be seen as the emergence of a truly multicultural church. As of today there are no large-scale efforts to create “national” or “personal” parishes; the membership of the parishes continuously changes due to the high mobility of families in urban settings; the new Catholics are more open to engage others who do not necessarily share their religious convictions; and the parish is not the exclusive center for the new Catholics to share their faith (e.g., homes, halls, study groups, universities). These new Catholics are not only immigrants from other countries, but also children of previous generations of Catholics who are challenging the structure and the understanding of the traditional parish to meet their new needs and expectations. These are the challenges that the Catholic parish in the United States faces in light of The New Catholicity.

The New Catholicity

Theologian Robert J. Schreiter has suggested that theology and the life of the church today stand between the global and the local (Schreiter, ix). It is a fact that globalization poses challenges to contemporary societies calling for fresher perspectives as to how theologians and ministers reflect about their faith. I think that the same principle applies to our understanding of the nature and mission
of the parish. Globalization invites us to rethink the local parish in the context of a world that is continuously adapting to all kinds of challenges through newer forms of technology, communication, and transportation. Citizens in the global world seem to just begin to settle about any of such forms when new technological advances and new loads of information demand being up to date. Societies like the United States are magnet centers in the global world. The population exchange between this country and others is higher than ever in order to compete with similar societies in a global economy. Faster means of transportation and highly advanced forms of communication transform whole communities in a matter of a few years. Millions of people who have arrived in the country in the recent decades are Catholic and they are also changing the understanding of the Catholic parish, especially in the urban areas where most settle.

*The New Catholicity* emerges as a response to the challenge of globalization (Schreiter, 129). It is the conviction that the Word of God can reach the ears of all women and men across cultures and that all cultures, different as they are, can somehow communicate with one another about their faith experiences (Schreiter, 128). If at previous stages of Christian history the church highlighted, at times unevenly, the theological marks of unity, holiness, and apostolicity, it is now appropriate to highlight the mark of Catholicity (Schreiter, 119).

Culturally diverse societies like the United States are microcosms that reflect the encounter of cultures from all over the world. It is not a strange phenomenon that large urban dioceses and archdioceses across the country become centers where the faith is celebrated in hundreds of languages. The cultural background of most Catholics in the United States today is not primarily Western European any more. In less than two decades Hispanic Catholics will represent the vast majority of Catholics in the country. But they are not alone because they share their parishes with millions of Catholics from many other cultural backgrounds—not to mention the large diversity of cultural traditions among Hispanics. Thus, because the encounter of cultures is a clear phenomenon occurring in thousands of urban parishes around the country, Catholics must rethink the nature and mission of their parochial communities in urban settings to meet the most urgent needs and expectations emerging in light of *The New Catholicity*. In the final section of this essay I consider some theological implications of this specific challenge.

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*Toward a Renewed Theological Understanding of the Parish*

I firmly believe that an appropriate metaphor to understand the Catholic parish in a multicultural society is that of *community of communities*. Understanding the parish as a community of communities not only provides a wider theological horizon to expound the prevailing juridical definition, but also prevents us from
enthroning one model of parish life as normative. Let us consider five theological implications of the parish as community of communities in light of *The New Catholicity* and the challenges they pose to ministers and theologians, especially to those working in urban settings.

First, the parish as community of communities reflects the true Catholicity of the church. Catholic comes from two Greek words: *kata* (every, including, according to) and *holos* (whole, everyone). Traditionally we translate “Catholic” as universal, but a more accurate rendering of the term is welcoming everyone (Groome, 397). This theological category reminds us that God’s call to humanity to relate with the divine as a community of hearers of the Word is not limited by the boundaries of ethnicity, language, or cultural tradition. On the contrary, the more that relationship is expressed in diverse ways, the more evident the mark of Catholicity appears. When a parish intentionally fosters what makes its inner communities unique, it discovers that there is more than one way to relate with God. Such an experience enriches the whole as well as the parts.

Second, hospitality and welcoming emerge as theological categories that spring from the life of the mature community that opens its arms to newcomers and shares the gifts that make that parish a true body of disciples of Christ. The presence of newcomers often challenges the status quo of our established communities and invites us to review our traditional ways. At the same time the new members bring their own gifts, often shaped by their culture and particular histories. They are called to recognize the values that permeate the life of the welcoming community and thus must show respect and appreciation for God’s presence at work in that parish. Each time a new person or community joins the parish there is an opportunity to welcome Christ in the other. When someone comes to the parish “to stay,” the spirit of hospitality of the community is set in motion to make this their Christian home. Since parishes in culturally diverse contexts are dynamic realities shaped by constant change, welcoming and hospitality emerge as theological categories that catalyze that change in Christian terms.

Third, ministry in a community of communities requires the maximum amount of collaboration possible. A concept that sums up that collaborative effort in a fine way is the Spanish concept of *Pastoral de Conjunto* (whole community ministry; my translation). The presence of various group communities within the

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same parish poses new challenges to its leadership. Beyond the traditional services in the areas of evangelization, liturgy, faith formation, spiritual development, and social concern in the parish, a renewed perspective of that community in culturally diverse contexts asks for models of ministry that are more inclusive, participatory, and attentive to the diversity of religious and cultural experiences of all members of the parish. Pastoral de Conjunto offers a model of ministry in dialogue in which the members of the community listen to one another at all levels, plan together, and respond to the most urgent needs and expectations of each community within the parish.

Fourth, this renewed model of parish yields a more dynamic christology and soteriology. The community learns that Christ has many faces and the experience of the paschal mystery is not a homogeneous reality. The suffering Christ of Good Friday in Hispanic popular religiosity tradition meets the more familiar risen Christ in Euro-American imagery. The Vietnamese understanding of Christ as the eldest brother encounters the liberating Christ experienced in the stories of freedom and hope of African American Catholics. Salvation for some is the encounter with God beyond death, while for others it begins with liberation from unjust social structures in the present history, and still for others it begins with a more conscious self-understanding of who they are as individuals and as members of a faith community. Such multiplicity of experiences of Christ converges in the liturgical celebrations, social commitments, and aesthetic expressions that each community shares with one another within the parish.

Finally, the parish as a community of communities leads its members to a clearer understanding of the other. The other is not an outsider anymore or somebody who one encounters by accident. The other is not a threat or someone radically different from who I am. The other is a person who lives and worships with me in my own community and challenges my own, often biased, experience of God and church. The other bears some good news that I would not have been able to encounter if I had not met this person and/or community at all. The other is the neighbor of the gospels who may have an unfamiliar face, a different way of doing things, may speak a different language to express a similar experience, and certainly a different history. Often all these differences strike us at once, but it is precisely in experiencing such differences that I truly discover who I am and the other as my neighbor.

The task of rethinking the parish in light of The New Catholicity calls theologians and ministers to develop new models of parish life.
Conclusion

The three families described at the beginning of this essay remind us that most Catholic parishes in the United States are highly diverse communities. These families represent a number of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic communities within the parish that represent a wealth of experiences along with a number of specific needs and expectations. The task of rethinking the parish in light of *The New Catholicity* calls theologians and ministers to develop new models of parish life that supplement and give life to the notion of parish as a juridical unit. The model of parish as community of communities that I offer in this essay seeks to respond to the challenges of understanding the nature and mission of the parish in culturally diverse contexts. I offer these reflections to theologians and ministers reflecting and working primarily in urban contexts, but their relevance does not exclude consideration in other settings. A closer look at the life of any parish around the country will reveal that speaking only one language, sharing a similar social status, or assuming the existence of a commonly agreed ethnic/cultural background does not guarantee homogeneity. There are always smaller communities within the larger community (e.g., men, women, youngsters, single mothers, young adults, educated families, uneducated families, conservatives, progressives, concerned members, unconcerned members, etc.). If the changes brought by globalization and its transformative effects continue such as we witnessed in the latter part of the twentieth century, eventually the vast majority of Catholic parishes in the United States, and other magnet countries in the world, will need to rethink their models of parish life to respond to diversity in terms of culture. Why not begin now?

References


