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TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF THE PARISH

- A Memoir and a Hope

By

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For the adult Catholic of the post Vatican II era, no word conjures up so many definitions and understandings as does the word "parish." In Roman Catholic vocabulary, the reality of this word in concrete terms has undergone significant changes and interpretation in the last decade.

Before Vatican II, the parish was literally THE place around which religious life and experience would revolve. Moreover, the parish would fulfill many basic human needs for a sense of community and relationships to others at almost every level of human life.

Essential to the parish structure was the pastor who not only exercised the expected spiritual leadership, but also wielded power and influence in the political, economic and social sphere of the neighborhood, village or town in which the parish was located. The pastor possessed a certain aura of infallibility and the lives of the faithful would respond to the policies which he established for those significant moments when human and religious life converged - birth, marriage, death.

Structures within a parish had a similarity about them in almost every area of the country. A parish school with a large staff of teaching nuns

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would be taken for granted. A Confraternity of Christian Doctrine provided religious instruction for those students attending public grade schools and high schools. Adult laity were involved in the large general parish groupings of the Altar and Rosary Sodality and the Holy Name Society. The YMCA was a forbidden place to go, and the parish structures responded to the needs of youth through the CYO or similar youth organization, usually under the direction of the young assistant pastor.

In large urban areas, the boundaries of a parish had paramount importance. Those who lived within these boundaries would be subject to the regulations and expectations of that local ecclesiastical entity. In a sense, the parish was a miniature self-contained society with a monarchical form of government which affected the lives of those who shared the heritage of the Catholic faith.

People would often identify the neighborhood or town in which they lived by the name of the Catholic parish which served that particular locality. If the Catholic population was significantly large, everyone in the area would be associated with that particular Church structure, whether they were Protestant, Jew, or atheist. Even to this day, when people describe their roots in many parts of the country, the pivotal geographical point is the Catholic parish.

For ethnic groups, who comprised much of the original Catholic population, the parish was a re-creation of the world they had left behind in Europe. Language and customs would be preserved in the maintenance of ethnic religious customs, the celebration of certain feast days, the language spoken in homilies or novena services. The parish was an anchor for transplanted people in the soil of a new land.

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The strength and power of the Catholic Church as an institution and religious organization was rooted in the local parish. Though an entity almost unto itself, the parish related to the diocese or archdiocese which in turn related to the world-wide Roman Catholic Church. Parishes provided the resource of a large number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Financial appeals for diocesan projects, missionary work, and the needs of the Church universal would rarely go unheeded. The dream and aspiration of every priest was to know someday that he would be appointed a pastor. This would be the ultimate reward and recognition for years of service to the institutional Church.

The values of the parochial structure as experienced by many in the past were truly significant. Parishes gave people the sense of belonging. The parish became the place where the individual story of human existence would be unraveled. Some explanation and understanding would be offered to those who belonged to the parish at the key moments of the human story - joy, sorrow, birth, sickness, suffering, marriage, death. A sense of pride in belonging to a particular parish was common and arguments and discussions would ensue at Central Catholic High Schools or in family gatherings as to which parish was really the best.

The above descriptions and characteristics of the Catholic parish were far more commonly found in urban areas or towns which had large Catholic populations. However, to some degree or other, the Catholic parish before the Second Vatican Council played a significant and important role in the lives of people no matter where they lived in the United States of America.

And suddenly, some years ago, without any announcement or obituary, so many dimensions of this structure of parish life into which we were born and raised virtually vanished from the American Catholic scene.

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Memories of this experience of parish life before Vatican II are preserved in such popular accounts as John Powers' The Last Catholic in America and in the sociological studies of Rev. Andrew Greeley. Individual memories of this past experience are resurrected in the minds of Catholic parents watching their children grow up today in parochial structures. Parents could well have a severe case of nostalgia and see their ^{own} parish experience as children as a certain Camelot which has disappeared.

The causes for disappearance of parish structures as we ^{the} ^{could} knew them are many. They include the significant religious, sociological, educational, and demographic upheavals which have occurred in our life time. Vatican II would challenge the Church to become almost a new entity in the world. Urban development and ^h ethnic and racial change would absorb previously stable neighborhoods in a brief period of time. An articulate and highly educated laity would call for greater involvement in structures which affected their lives and would also begin to question Church teaching on issues ranging from birth control and divorce to racial prejudice and economic justice. Our nation at the same time experienced almost an internal revolution in the quest for civil rights and the difficulty of dealing with an emerging war in a previously unknown place called Viet-Nam. The parameters of our existence expanded with exploration into space and new discoveries by science and medicine affecting human life.

The previous stable elements of human existence, Church and country, no longer claimed the same allegiance. A decline in religious vocations coupled with a massive exodus from religious life by priests and nuns depleted the necessary religious leadership of the past to staff old and new Church structures, and especially the parish as we knew it. Lay people suddenly became

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a necessary and essential part of Catholic education. Laymen and laywomen responded to the liturgical challenges of Vatican II in assuming new roles and responsibilities in religious worship. The Vatican II statement that "The Church is People of God" would be taken seriously in the creation of structures at the diocesan and parish level to share responsibility and decision making. The call by women for equal rights within society would also be a cry within the Church and would bring about the discussion and statements on the ordination of women and women's rights within the Church.

And throughout all this historical and sociological development over the last ten or fifteen years, the parish still exists as a structure within the Roman Catholic Church. The parish structure perhaps is not as rigid as it was before Vatican II. In some places, experimentations regarding new forms of parish structure have been initiated, often with the celebration of the liturgy as the focal point for those who belong.

The constants which characterized parochial structures before Vatican II remain the same today. There are still people within a neighborhood, village or town who share a faith heritage and want to belong to a community of religious believers. There are still physical buildings of Churches and schools, rectories and convents. There are still ordained priests as pastors of parishes with probably less assistance from associate pastors as in the past, but with new dedicated leadership of permanent deacons and laity. What does the Church do today to make the local parish a vibrant center of faith and worship? The response could well be the beginning of a development of the theology of a parish for the Church of the seventies.

A theology of a parish must involve an understanding of theology itself. Theology is a systematic reflection on the knowledge of God as he has revealed himself to us. Essential to theology is the revelation of God through the scriptures and through the Lord Jesus Christ. This revelation is maintained through the life of the Christian community in its ongoing lived

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experiences through the centuries. In each generation, revelation which is at the basis of theology must speak to the lived human experience and situations of peoples' lives. A theology of the parish should consequently provide the connection between the revelation of God through Scripture and the Lord Jesus and this gathering of people who come together in faith and worship which we call a parish.

Far too often, a narrow view of revelation places the present lived human experience in conflict with it. It is the contrast between a reality of the past and the reality of the moment. However, in the wide understanding of the meaning of revelation, revelation itself becomes alive and vibrant as it responds to the life situations of people and the Church today. In turn, such realities as the parish within the Christian faith community takes on new life as it responds to the challenge of revelation.

This encounter between revelation as it continues to exist in the Church today and the lived experience of the parish is the basis for developing a theology of the parish. Sabbas J. Kilian, O.F.M. offers a fundamental approach and five theological models for a theology of the parish in his book, Theological Models for the Parish. (Alba House, 1977) Joseph M. Champlin describes through concrete examples what happens to a parish as it seeks to explore its own self-understanding and mission in The Living Parish, a Believing, Caring, Praying People (Ave Maria Press, 1977). Thomas Sweetser, SJ, through a parish evaluation project is unearthing a self-understanding by people within a faith community to discover the full meaning of the significance of the parish in the Church today.

A theology of the parish should be open and flexible as it responds to revelation and 2000 years of a Christian Catholic faith tradition. A theology of the parish is^d theology of becoming in relation to the constant which is the Spirit, the promised gift of the Lord to the believers. A theology of becoming is the ongoing relationship between a God speaking and people responding.

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The relationship between a God speaking and people responding, however, does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs at a moment in time and in a definite place. Such a relationship cannot be defined because such definitions limit and confine this relationship. Rather, such an approach to a theology of the parish calls for a descriptive theology which reflects the becoming dimensions of a God who speaks and a people who respond at this moment in time in this geographical location or community of people which we call a parish.

Our approach to a theology of the parish involves a description of the characteristics of the dialogue and relationship between God and His people. These characteristics are rooted in Vatican II's understanding of the Church itself as "the People of God." As such, the parish has the opportunity to concretize in tangible ways the vision of the total Church. This vision becomes prophetic, because it sees reality, and yet sees beyond; it recognizes the present and yet envisions the future; it challenges the now moment and yet hopes for the future. The characteristics of the parish of today must be open to flexibility, but at the same time possess a constancy with roots in the memoirs of a personal and ecclesial past faith tradition.

The following characteristics of a parish are by no means exhaustive. However, they could serve as the beginning of reflections by priests and people in parochial structures today to develop a theology of parish life.

First, it would seem that a parish must reflect the same attitude toward its members as God himself does. And that is to recognize the freedom and dignity of the people of God. Such freedom and dignity calls for people to use their varied and unique gifts in different ways and in diverse ministries. Consequently, a parish must be open to ever-new and ^{personally} ever-changing responses to the Christian message. In practical terms, pre-set and pre-programmed approaches to parish life would contradict the freedom and dignity of the People of God.

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Secondly, a parish should reflect the description of the People of God as a "communion of life and love. True Christian friendship seems to express this characteristic best whereby the parish reveals in reality the community it seeks to form. Friendship for a parish community calls for a shared belief and shared care which extends beyond the gestures at the greeting of people during a liturgical celebration or the mechanical signs of recognition at social gatherings. A parish must be characterized not only as a band of believers, but as a band of friends. Whatever practical means are available should be used by both pastor and people to develop this relationship between people at all levels of parish life.

Thirdly, a parish must seriously consider its obligation of helping the People of God become a "visible sacrament of unity." Such visibility becomes the next characteristic essential for a theology of the parish. A parish does not come into existence because of a generalized common denominator which is accepted by those who belong. A parish proclaims a faith which it celebrates in liturgy which in turn is lived out in the concrete circumstances of family, business, neighborhood, government and the multi-faceted dimensions of human life. Such proclamation must be announced visibly to the world in which we live. A visible faith is contradicted by ambiguity and compromise.

The People of God are expected everywhere on earth to bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs. A parish must do no less. Rather, a parish in the Roman Catholic faith tradition must announce a catholicity with all that the word implies. Such catholicity places no barriers to the recruitment and inclusion of new members in the faith community. In practical terms, such catholicity emphasizes the healing of previous divisions and rejects the polarization implied in ethnic, racial, educational, economic and other differences

The People of God "share also in Christ's prophetic office." Therefore, a parish likewise must assume a prophetic stance so that it challenges and excites all its members to the full implications of the Gospel message. The prophetic stance is often not the popular or comfortable position. But the prophetic office of a parish community was never meant to be such as is evident in the lives of the Old Testament prophets, the life of the Lord Jesus himself, and the witness of countless others over the last 2000 years. Prophetic witness to the Gospel is not only the task of the individual, but it is also the response of a parish faith community.

Finally, the People of God are "called to a perfection of sanctity" which then implies that a parish must live a sanctifying life style and mission whereby the parish community provides the opportunity for this sanctity in a celebration of Word and Sacrament. A theology of the parish could well focus in upon its social and political mission within a community, but this final characteristic of the parish gives the parish community its true Christian identity. The sanctifying life style of a parish places present events and challenges against the larger framework of a past and a future, of a tradition and a promise.

Were these characteristics absent in the experience of parish life before Vatican II? Far from it. Are these characteristics ~~which describe~~^{of} the People of God in Vatican II's Constitution on the Church sufficiently described to be the basis for a theology of the parish today? Obviously not! Are functions of the previous structures of parishes to be completely ignored and forgotten? The answer is "No!."

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A parish is a lived human experience of people sharing a religious faith. A parish should take advantage of the success dimensions evident in past structures. Parishes should continue to give people a sense of belonging. Parishes should be the context where people are able to make some sense of the story of their lives. Parishes should continue to carry on the work of the Lord Jesus, a work of service. The development of a theology for parish structures should take these functions into account.

However, the parish of today and tomorrow is in the process of developing a theology, a response to the revelation of God which must set priorities and incarnate characteristics of the Gospel message. A theology of the parish will not happen overnight. Rather, we are working towards this theology in the reality of parish life today with its memoirs of the past and its hope in the future. The full implications of that theology are still to be realized!