

(IV)
EVANGELIZATION AND THE PARISH

I. Why Look at Parish?

In recent years the dignity of the person and the role of culture have been central to the Church's mission of evangelization. However, between a theological anthropology of *the person* and the social analysis of *culture* there is another practical dimension of Christian life that has been somewhat ignored. I am referring to the idea and function of parish. Helping parishes to become missionary, that is, to become engines of evangelization is one challenge that the Bishops of North America face.¹ Understanding the meaning of Parish and its mission to evangelize deserves focused attention and action for five reasons. First, we often take the idea of parish for granted. In urban areas, the territorial definition of parish has very little or no meaning. People seek the parish and the Sunday Mass time that maximizes their convenience and satisfaction thanks to the car and a dash of the consumerism.

Parish allegiance is diminishing.² What idea of parish is really operative today? What idea should be operative and what should we be doing about it? Second, the *Church* is a *catalyst* or at least an *arena* for the dynamic between culture and the faithful. But is this happening at the parish level? At least one Canadian theologian has argued it is not and that in the future parishes may not be necessary.³ Third, immigration and multiculturalism have radically altered the presuppositions and expectations of what a parish is and how it should function. In the Greater Toronto Area, the Eucharistic Assembly is a wonderful sight to behold because of the variety of multinational faces. But serving multinational needs and expectations is a challenge. Toronto celebrates Eucharist in 34 languages. Fourth, in 1983 the Code of Canon Law made some critical structural changes to the parish. Financial committees were mandated. Pastoral Councils were recommended. These changes certainly have focused attention on parish *maintenance*. But have they enhanced the *mission* of evangelization?

Fifth, in the last ten years the Vatican has conferred canonical status to more than 120 Lay Movements.⁴ Grist for heated discussion in academic and Episcopal circles, these Lay Movements have also had an impact on the Parish. Parishioners are finding *something* in these lay movements that they simply are not finding in parish life. What exactly have they found wanting in the parish? Toronto is home

¹Rolheiser, Ronald, author and editor *Secularity and the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 2006).

²For example, one Diocese decided to cluster parishes due to diminishing numbers. Pastors expected parishioners to resent the loss of parish identity and activities. Instead, parishioners were most upset about the forfeiture of their customary Mass time. As one pastor put it, people have an allegiance to their Sunday Mass hour, not their parish community.

³Routhier, Gilles. "From a Project of Adaptation to Refounding," in *Secularity and the Gospel*, ed. Ronald Rohlheiser, (New York: Crossroad, 2006) 51-167, esp. 165.

⁴*International Associations of the Faithful: Directory*, Pontifical Council for the Laity (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006).

to 23 new Pontifical Lay Movements. Pastors and parishioners are responding with hesitancy, curiosity and some suspicion. Despite canonical status, some of these movements are not welcome in some dioceses, while in other dioceses they are embraced as sources of new vitality and hope for the Church. Arriving in Toronto in 1997, the Neo-Catechumenal Movement established a seminary in 1999 and has ordained eight priests for the Archdiocese. The Focolare Movement has ordained one member for its Toronto community as have the Heralds of the Gospel who founded a Seminary in Brazil last year. I wasn't surprised when one Pastor asked me, "Bishop, do you see the Lay movements replacing the parish? Is this the future of the Church?" Considering that the mission and challenge of the Church is to evangelize, I have offered five reasons why we would do well to revisit the meaning and function of Parish, which brings me to part II.

II. Parish: Two Aspects Needing Attention

The word *parish* has many connotations. I wish to identify two that need much more emphasis to address the Church's mission of evangelization.

First, we need to emphasize the parish as a center for contemplation.

John Paul II repeatedly challenged Bishops and Priests with the idea that parishes should be schools of prayer.⁵ He wrote that Catholicism perceived as rules, rituals and wardrobes, devoid of the human *experience* of the transcendent does not give life.⁶

Forty years ago Karl Rahner, wrote "The devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic' one who has experienced something, or he will cease to be anything at all."⁷ In 1976 William McNamara rightly identified the consequences of ignoring Rahner's admonition when he wrote "A Christianity that is not basically mystical must become either a 'political ideology or a mindless fundamentalism'.⁸

Recent studies have shown that people are less interested in religion but are very much attracted to spirituality. That is the good news. The better news is coming from a Canadian sociologist, Reginald Bibby. In his latest book "*The Boomer Factor: What Canada's most Famous Generation is Leaving Behind*" he argues that while the boomers were deeply affected by secularism, the post boomers

⁵Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Vatican, 2001) ¶33. See also his emphasis on contemplation as a function of community in *Apostolic Letter Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 2002, *Encyclical Letter Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, 2003, and *Apostolic Letter Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 2004.

⁶Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Rome, 2002).

⁷Karl Rahner, "Christian Living Formerly and Today", *Theological Investigations*, vol. 7, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971) 15.

⁸William McNamara, *The Human Adventure: Contemplation for Everyman* (Garden City NY: Image, 1976) 25.

are open to religion. Bibby writes, “They are not just looking for the latest spiritual fad. They want structure”.⁹

In an earlier study, Bibby identified four categories of Christians: committed at 9%, customized at 20%, ceremonial at 22%, and census at 13%.¹⁰ Is parish ministry actively reaching out to the customized, ceremonial and census Catholics? More important, is it reaching beyond them into the wider secular community? How much of Parish ministry is geared to *maintaining* the customized, ceremonial and census Catholics?

If parishes continue to maintain this blend of ‘conventional Catholicism’ more and more people (and not just Catholics) who are yearning for authentic, personal spirituality will have to look elsewhere.¹¹

The Catholic Church has a rich variety of meditative and contemplative prayer traditions. Now is the time to draw on those traditions. Now is the time to *learn* how Parishes can become schools of contemplative prayer.

Second, we need to raise awareness of the eschatological nature of parish. Despite the emphasis given eschatology by Vatican II, parishes are losing, not gaining an awareness of purpose or destiny. In *Crossing the Threshold*, Pope John Paul II said “to a certain degree, *eschatology* has become irrelevant to contemporary man.”¹² He offers three causes for this insensitivity: secularism, consumerism and in particular the horror of two world wars. The word “parish” is found in the Septuagint. ‘Paroikia’ means “living in a foreign land without civil or domestic rights”, community life in exile.¹³ I am going to quote at length from a fascinating

⁹*The Catholic Register* (28 January 2007) 19. Professor David Goa, director of the University of Alberta’s Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, agrees but for very different reasons. Given that the post-boomers have learned that science is a method, powerless in the face of the judgments that we must make based on what it is to be human, and given a near total amnesia of their Christian roots, students are now asking profound philosophical questions without prejudice against religion. Peter Menzies, *Globe and Mail* (3 March 2007) 25.

¹⁰Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods and Restless Churches: Realizing the Renaissance in Canada* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004). Cited from “The Complicated and Irrepressible Canadian Church” by Dan Posterski and Andrew Grenville in *Envision* (Spring 2004): 2-9.

¹¹Reginald Bibby, “Beyond Resilience to Renaissance: A Canadian Case for Catholics Everywhere in *Secularity and Gospel*, ed. Ronald Rohlheiser (New York: Crossroad) 189-201. Also, Dennis Billy, ‘Moral Mysticism in a Parish Setting’ in *Spirituality and Moral Theology: Essays from a Pastoral Perspective*, ed. James Keating, (New York, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press) 18-19.

¹²Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Knopf, 1994) 183-84.

¹³Dennis Billy, “Moral Mysticism in a Parish Setting” in *Spirituality and Moral Theology*, ed. James Keating (New York: Paulist, 2000) 12. Christians used this concept to refer to the early life of the Christian community whose true country and citizenship was in heaven. Cf. Philippians 3:20.

article entitled 'Moral Mysticism in a Parish Setting' by Dennis Billy. His exposition of the eschatological meaning of Parish is clear and cogent.

The root meaning of parish as sojourners in a foreign land must be retrieved from our tradition and embedded in our minds so that it becomes the word's primary meaning for us. . . . As Catholics we relate to one another and to the world through a local parish setting. . . . We seek to serve the world and love it through our personal and communal witness. We seek to build up the kingdom here in our midst and strive so that peace and justice will one day reign in our little corner of the earth and beyond. We also have a sense, however, that it is not our real home, that we are being called elsewhere. We are IN the world, but not OF it. We are citizens of heaven and at times, even get a glimpse of what life will be like. . . . Our use of the word, "Parish" reminds us of the teleological dimensions of the Christian faith and our communal call to beatitude. All of us yearn for home; we all long to see God face to face.¹⁴

Notice, at the end of this description of parish, the author intersects eschatological awareness with contemplation. Imagine communities of people in recognition of their restless hearts, acknowledging and identifying themselves as a 'paroikia'. This is a wonderful, inspiring and I daresay a rather romantic description of Parish.

Is it *too* romantic to *imagine* parishes in North America this way? Not according to some experts. Reporting on four multi-disciplinary symposia between 2002 and 2004 Ron Rolheiser identified the aim of these think tanks as, "A belief that what is most needed right now to inspire us as missionaries within secularity is a *re-inflaming of the romantic imagination* within religion."¹⁵

Rick Warren's best seller, "*The Purpose Driven Life: What am I here for?*" sold twenty million copies in more than twenty languages and was #1 on the New York Times bestseller list for many months. He thinks the lack of divine purpose in our culture is killing us. Suffused in an eschatological motif, Warren's language is simple and direct.¹⁶

I draw attention to the work of this evangelical preacher for one reason only; to point out that there is a vast readership connecting an eschatological message to their daily experience. His brand of eschatology offers an alternative to the secular mentality of our culture and he does so by identifying the longing in the human heart for a deeper awareness of the Transcendent who offers purpose and direction in life.

In summary: There is an abundance of theological material on eschatology. Our sacramental system and liturgies are suffused with eschatological significance.

¹⁴Dennis Billy, "Moral Mysticism," in *Spirituality and Moral Theology*, ed. James Keating, 13.

¹⁵Rolheiser, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 19.

¹⁶Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on earth am I here for?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

There is no shortage of magisterial pronouncements on eschatology. And finally, a culture bereft of purpose seems ready for this message. As Bishops I think we have everything we need to meet this challenge. The challenge is not to *teach* it, but to *learn* how to become truly “*paroikia*”, sojourners in a foreign land.

Conclusion

The mission of the Church is evangelization. To this end, some have argued that the Church must shift from a maintenance mode to a missionary mode. The Bishops in North America are called to meet this challenge particularly at the parish level. As I understand it, Parish strategies of PR, novelty and spin do not evangelize. Evangelization happens on account of attraction to Jesus and His message of Good News. I have indicated two aspects of Parish, prayer and eschatological identity, that might move the grass roots level of Church a little closer towards fulfilling its mission of evangelizing a secular culture.

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