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How parish life has changed

Mary Gautier | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America

Parishioners take up the collection during Mass at the Church of the Holy Cross in Minneapolis in October 2010. The parish has appealed a plan to merge it, along with two other parishes, into St. Anthony of Padua, also in Minneapolis. (CNS/Catholic Spirit/Jim Bovin)

Parish Life

A lot has changed in parish life in a quarter-century, yet American Catholics are still predominantly attached to territorial parishes headed by a priest pastor. The model is being stretched and transformed, however, by tremendous demographic changes in the Catholic population. Church leaders are struggling to keep up.

In the years since we began this series on American Catholic laity, the Catholic population in the United States has increased by more than a fifth. It continues to grow at about 1 percent a year and even conservative estimates project that Catholics will top 100 million by the middle of the 21st century. The Catholic population is becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse as well, influenced by immigration from predominantly Catholic countries around the world.

Catholics are also more dispersed geographically than they were in 1987, continuing a late 20th-century pattern of movement out of the inner cities and into the suburbs, out of the traditional Catholic strongholds in the Northeast and the Upper Midwest and into the rapidly growing Sun Belt cities in the South and the Southwest. An unintended consequence of this growth and migration has been a mismatch between Catholic institutions and Catholic population. While more and more large, once-beautiful urban parishes and elementary schools in the traditional Catholic population centers such as Cleveland and Boston struggle under the burden of too few Catholics to provide financially for their maintenance or to keep them vibrant communities of faith, Catholics in Southern cities such as Atlanta and Fort Worth, Texas, are lobbying their bishops for new parishes and schools to accommodate the growth.

In 1987, there were about 19,600 parishes for 54 million Catholics, or about 2,700 Catholics for every parish. By 2011, the number of parishes had been reduced to about 17,800, a net decline of more than 7 percent. Even

though most of the parish mergers and closures occurred in the Northeast and the Upper Midwest, in areas that have lost Catholic population, there has been no corresponding increase in new parishes in the areas of the country that are experiencing the most growth. Thus, the ratio nationally is now more than 3,600 Catholics per parish.

At the same time that the numbers of Catholics have been growing, the numbers of priests and sisters, who provided the bulk of parish ministry in 1987, continue to decline. This places additional pressure on parish life, which revolves around the sacraments and requires a priest for most of them. In 1987, there were about 1,000 parish-identified Catholics for every priest; in 2011, there are more than 1,600 per priest -- an increase of more than 60 percent. The number of priests serving in the United States has declined by a quarter since 1987 and the number of religious sisters has declined by almost half. This shortfall has been compensated, to an extent, by an increase in the number of permanent deacons and lay ecclesial ministers serving in parishes. Both of these pastoral leadership positions were relatively new in 1987 but are an increasingly accepted part of parish life today.

Some want to make the case that parish life is less important to Catholics today than it was in 1987, pointing out that Catholics are less likely now to attend Mass regularly. We do see a gradual decrease in the percentage who say that they attend Mass at least weekly, from 44 percent in 1987 to 31 percent in 2011, but almost no variation in the percentage who attend less than weekly (but more than monthly).

Some of the change in Mass attendance comes from generational replacement, as the pre-Vatican II Catholics age out and are replaced by post-Vatican II and millennial Catholics, who are less regular than the oldest generation in their Mass attendance. But how much of this change can be explained by changes in Catholic identity? How much is explained by the significant demographic changes noted above? These questions will be explored in more depth as we analyze the data from the surveys and report them in a forthcoming book.

Laity and leadership

In general, we see from the trends that Catholics remain attached to parish life. Most Catholics disagree that Catholic parishes are too big and impersonal, despite the fact that half of all parishes today have more than 750 attending over the course of a typical weekend. Catholics still feel strongly that parish priests are doing a good job. Overall, nine in 10 agree with that statement.

We do see, however, some increasing signs of discontent with parish leadership. Despite the fact that opportunities for lay leadership have increased as parishes get larger and more complex, lay Catholics seem somewhat reluctant to step up to the plate. Ten years ago, when we first asked the question, less than half of lay Catholics (44 percent) agreed with the statement, ?Most priests don?t expect the laity to be leaders, just followers.? Today, about six in 10 agree. That sentiment is reinforced by a new question we asked for the first time in 2011. Two-thirds of lay Catholics agree that ?most Catholics don?t want to take on leadership roles in their parish.?

At the same time, Catholic laity are still uniformly in agreement that they should have the right to participate in decisions about parish life that affect them. Three in four agree that they should be able to participate in selecting the priests for their parish and in deciding about parish closings. Even more, eight in 10, say they should have the right to participate in deciding how to spend parish income.

For the most part, these opinions are shared across the generations. However, the oldest generation is less likely than younger Catholics to agree that laity should have the right to participate in selecting priests for their parish. Just over half of pre-Vatican II Catholics agree with that statement, compared to between 70 and 75 percent of the younger generations.

Lay Catholics also have relatively strong and consistent opinions about the variety of alternatives that dioceses are using to address the demographic changes described at the beginning of this essay. As the numbers of priests available to pastor a parish declines and the Catholic population moves away from traditional Catholic neighborhoods, bishops are exploring a variety of options to reorganize parish life and ministry. We asked Catholics about several of these alternatives and we find that their attitudes about each alternative remain quite consistent over time.

For example, the three most acceptable alternatives among lay Catholics include sharing a priest with one or more other parishes, merging two or more nearby parishes into one, and bringing in a priest from another bringing in a priest from another country to lead the parish. Each of these alternatives is at least somewhat acceptable to about nine in 10 lay Catholics.

There is another alternative, spelled out in canon 517.2 of the Code of Canon Law, that allows a bishop to ?entrust a share in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish? to ?a deacon, or some other person who is not a priest.? In practice, this means that the bishop appoints a deacon, a religious or a layperson to assume the day-to-day administrative and pastoral responsibility for a parish, with one or more priests (who often are in residence at another parish) to handle the sacramental and canonical responsibilities for the parish. This is a difficult concept to explain in just a few words on a survey question, and when we phrased the option as ?Not having a resident priest in the parish but only a lay parish administrator and visiting priests? no more than about half found that alternative even somewhat acceptable. However, when we rephrased the question in 2011 to read ?Having a deacon or layperson run the parish, with visiting priests for sacraments? three in four lay Catholics said that would be at least somewhat acceptable.

Most would find it at least somewhat acceptable to reduce the number of weekend Masses or to have a Communion service instead of a Mass some of the time, but only about a third agree that closing the parish is even somewhat acceptable.

Finally, while about four in 10 would find it at least somewhat acceptable if there was no priest available for visiting the sick -- which is a ministry that can be performed by a layperson -- not having a priest available for administering the last rites for the dying is ?not at all acceptable? for three in four Catholics.

Summary

Catholic parish life is quite different than it was in 1987, yet in many ways it is still the same. We see little in the data to suggest that Catholics have rejected parish life, even though it has changed in some rather significant ways. More than half still disagree that parishes are too big and impersonal, even as Catholic parishes are rivaling evangelical megachurches in size. They still agree that parish priests do a good job, even when the pastor comes from another country or has sole responsibility for several parishes. They are still very willing to accept a variety of compromises to keep parishes open as the numbers of available priests continue to decline. Parishioners would like to have more say in the decisions that affect parish life, but they seem committed to the model even as it is evolving. Although we are not in the business of predicting the future, the data suggest that parish life, whatever form it takes, will continue to be an important spiritual base for Catholic laity.

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TABLE 5

TRENDS IN MASS ATTENDANCE,

	1987	1993	1999	2005	2011
Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you					

At least once a week	44%	42%	37%	34%	31%
Two or three times a month	13	15	19	16	13
About once a month	17	18	15	14	9
Less than monthly	26	25	29	36	47

TABLE 6

TRENDS IN ATTITUDES ABOUT CHURCH LEADERS AND PARISH LIFE, 1999-2011

Percentage responding "Somewhat agree" or "Strongly agree"

	1999	2055	2011
On the whole, parish priests do a good job	91%	91%	88%
Most Catholics don't want to take on leadership roles in their parish	---	---	65
Most priests don't expect the laity to be leaders, just followers	44	53	58
Catholic parishes are too big and impersonal	46	40	43

TABLE 7

SHOULD CATHOLIC LAITY HAVE THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN??

Percentage responding "Should"

	1987	1993	1999	2005	2011
Deciding how parish income should be spent	81%	83%	86%	89%	80%
Deciding about parish closings	---	---	---	80	75
Selecting the priests for their parish	57	74	73	71	75

TABLE 8

TRENDS IN ACCEPTANCE OF PARISH LEADERSHIP ALTERNATIVES, 1987-2011

Percentage responding "Very acceptable" or "Somewhat acceptable"

Sharing a priest with one or more other parishes	
1987	--
1993	--
1999	--
2005	92%

2011	93

Merging two or more nearby parishes into one parish

1987	--
1993	--
1999	--
2005	--
2011	71%

Reducing the number of Saturday evening and Sunday Masses

1987	--
1993	--
1999	--
2005	88%
2011	99

Bringing in a priest from another country to lead the parish

Reducing the number of

Not having a priest available for visiting the sick

1987	24%
1993	41
1999	34
2005	37

Not having a priest available for administering the last rites to the dying

1987	15%
1993	30
1999	20
2005	20
2011	26

Having a deacon or layperson run the parish, with visiting priests for sacraments	
1987	--
1993	--
1999	--
2005	--
2011	76%

Not having a resident priest in the parish but only a lay parish administrator and visiting priests	
1987	39%
1993	56
1999	51
2005	54
2011	--

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