NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Seismic shifts reshape US Catholicism

Tom Roberts | Jan. 17, 2012

Archbishop Charles Chaput, right, sits with Jack Quindlen during a Jan. 6 news conference to announce that 48 diocesan schools in Philadelphia will close or merge. (Reuters/Mark Blinch)

Archbishop Charles Chaput?s announcement Jan. 6 that the Philadelphia archdiocese will be closing schools in record numbers during the coming year (see story [1]) was the latest and loudest rumble in a series of seismic displacements that are permanently reshaping the look of U.S. Catholicism.

What is happening in Philadelphia follows the same script, fashioned by demographic shifts and economic need, that has been in use throughout the Northeast and Upper Midwest. The drama may differ in particulars from place to place -- some bishops might accomplish the grim task with more pastoral sensitivity than others, some may involve the larger community more deeply in the decision-making process than others -- but the results are pretty much the same. From Philadelphia to Newark, N.J., New York to Boston, Cleveland to Chicago to Detroit and beyond, the church of the immigrants is going the same route as the old industrial America of our forebears. The huge plants -- churches, schools and parish halls -- markers of another era, like the hulking steel mills and manufacturing plants of old, can no longer be sustained. There aren?t enough Catholics left in those places, not enough priests and nuns and certainly not enough money to maintain the church as it once was.

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington, the church in the United States has lost 1,359 parishes during the past 10 years, or 7.1 percent of the national total, and most of those have been in the Northeast and the Upper Midwest.

?I?m developing a theory that one of our major challenges today is that American Catholic leadership is being strangled by trying to maintain the behemoth of the institutional Catholicism that we inherited from the 1940s and ?50s,? New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan told *NCR*?s John Allen in the recently released book-length interview *A People of Hope*.

The upheaval and displacement is profound and goes beyond the dismantling of what the ?builder generation? of Catholics produced. The changes go deeper than the bricks and mortar of Catholic identity to the psychology and practice of what it means to be Catholic today. ?We have before us a generation of young adults and young Catholics who are negotiating life and faith in a wholly different way,? Franciscan Fr. David B. Couturier said in a speech last October to the Council of Priests of New York State.

From East to West

Trying to characterize the church nationally becomes increasingly complex. Seen from the heart of Detroit, which closed three dozen schools and fired a third of diocesan employees during the last decade and is now projecting that as many as 40 parishes will be closed in the next decade, it may seem that the church is collapsing. In reality, said church spokesman Ned McGrath, the archdiocese is planning how to maintain the church?s presence amid population decline and the severe effects of the recent recession, forces that have been building for years.

Parishes within the city are about $5 million in arrears to the diocese for a variety of reasons and those parishes owe another $850,000 to the Michigan Catholic Conference for employee benefits, McGrath said. Parish closings, he said, will be spread throughout the diocese, from inner city to rural areas. The archdiocese currently is deep into a pastoral planning process, ?Together in Faith,? that McGrath said is a ?lay-driven process? to reimagine the shape of the future church.

The story is quite different in the West and Southwest and even some areas of the East Coast, where the problem pastoral planners often face is how to build facilities fast enough and how to handle growth, caused by population shifts and immigration, given the lack of priests to accommodate the old style of parish development.

Some demographers and pastoral planners agree that in terms of structure, practice and even to a degree, ecclesiology, the church in the United States can be distinctly different from East to West. The former, now undergoing the greatest sense of upheaval, was characterized by a formality as well as an institutional presence and bearing that mimicked the power and influence centers of the secular culture.

Out West, the general tenor of the church is less formal. Chancery offices and bishops? residences in the West are more likely than not to be less imposing and ostentatious than their Eastern counterparts. With a growing Hispanic influence, the church in many places is also characteristically more relational, more centered on family, community and feast day celebrations than the more legalistic approach of the institution in the East with its roots in the Irish church. ?You move past the Mississippi and the church changes,? said Ted Furlow, director of pastoral planning for the San Bernardino diocese in Southern California. Furlow himself personifies some of the difference. He doesn?t come out of the clerical culture -- he?s married, has a marketing degree from the University of San Francisco and was a general contractor for 27 years. A bad fall from a ladder shattered his leg and ended that career. He took over a church position as a replacement for someone who had become ill, and he stayed. In a Jan. 4 interview, he said he was finishing a final paper for a master?s in pastoral theology from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

The church in San Bernardino is heavily influenced by Hispanics. ?We?re more pastorally oriented and less systematically structured? than a lot of Anglo parishes, Furlow said. ?It?s faith, family, fiesta -- Catholic folklorico,? he said.

That affects the ecclesiology, the sense of relationship among priests, people and bishops. So does the fact that of the 241 active priests in the diocese, more than half -- 125 -- are order priests. The diocese also has nearly as many permanent deacons -- 107 -- as diocesan priests.

Another characteristic of San Bernardino that is often found in dioceses of the West and Southwest -- and one that can affect how authority is exercised and perceived -- is distance. The San Bernardino diocese, 12th-largest in the country, serves about 1.2 million Catholics spread across 27,293 square miles, an area larger than nine U.S. states, and that includes everything from urban centers to high desert. Some of the difference grows out of the landscape and people?s living situations. The term ?clusters? in the East is the language of downsizing; the same term out West, Furlow noted, is used to explain cooperative ventures necessary to deal with growth.

The new Catholics

Couturier, director of pastoral planning for the Boston archdiocese, said that for the new generation of emerging adults (22-40 years old), the ?polarizing debates of ideology (red state and blue state/red hymnal and blue hymnal) are no longer interesting or practical. This is a generation that is being forced by the new and untested rules of economic engagement to delay their decisions and commitments about careers, love and family well beyond the time that the church is structurally able to engage them.?

The talk he gave in New York, titled ?The Pastors We Are Becoming -- the Church We Have Become,? is companion to an earlier keynote speech, ?The Catholics We Are Becoming,? delivered in April to the annual conference on Pastoral Planning and Council Development.

If conditions in civil society are affecting the younger Catholics? relationship with the church, so are conditions within the institution itself. Boston represents a ? ?perfect storm? of pastoral pain for laity and clergy alike,? Courturier said in his April presentation. The sex abuse scandal that broke there in 2002 and the overwhelming ?feelings of rage ... and betrayal? it generated were followed by ?aftershocks? -- the poorly timed reconfiguration of parishes and the finding in a study that Boston priests were ?experiencing a post-traumatic stress that is comparable to the stress experienced by the men and women of Oklahoma City after their terrorist attack.?

Add to those the financial stress caused by myriad forces, not least of which was a dramatic drop in church attendance, and you have the making of a pastoral planner?s nightmare.

Boston, and Philadelphia after it, drew a huge media spotlight because of the details of the sex abuse crisis that surfaced in each archdiocese as the result of legal procedures. In terms of reshaping the church, however, those revelations simultaneously complicated and in some ways hastened a process that had been under way for a long time.

Scandal or not, the old industrial centers were emptying out, and the new generation of believers have a different attitude toward Catholic practice.

What we know, Couturier said, is that ?Catholics are developing a complex relationship between their Catholic identity on the one hand, and the way they understand what it means to practice their identity in the traffic of daily life on the other.

?They are changing their mind and their behavior when it comes to the moral authority of the hierarchy and their commitment to the institutional church and its policies and regulations.?

Unlike those who begin the analysis with questions about why Catholics

have lost their faith or ?fallen away,? Couturier begins with the understanding, based on considerable evidence from surveys over time, that Catholics ?show an amazing level of continuity in their beliefs. ... Whether rich or poor, young or old, urban or suburban, liberal or conservative,? they continue to hold core beliefs in such matters of faith as the Resurrection, the real presence in the Eucharist, Mary as the mother of God, God?s special presence to the poor and the importance of prayer and charity in everyday life.

Catholics may really like being Catholic and identifying themselves as such, but research also shows, Couturier said, that those same Catholics ?are diverging, sometimes dramatically, on their attitudes toward church practice: how frequently one should attend Mass, on issues of sexual morality, on abortion and homosexuality, on the discipline that only celibate men can become priests and over the church?s involvement in activities directed toward social justice.?

Catholics are ?rethinking the way they understand the task of religion,? authority within the institution and their roles in the faith.

The institutions that met the needs of the waves of immigrants from Europe, those established by the ?builder generation? and sustained by the boomer generation, may not meet the needs of the postmodern generation. Perhaps no greater symbol exists of the transition than Archbishop Séan O?Malley?s $172 million sale in 2004 of Boston?s iconic 65-acre Brighton Chancery compound, and the intended sale by Chaput, who lived in relatively simply circumstances during his tenure as archbishop of Denver, of the archbishop?s richly appointed, 10,000-square-foot manse and surrounding grounds along Philadelphia?s City Line Avenue.

By dint of circumstance (and perhaps by intent of the East Coast?s two Franciscan prelates) the church is being stripped of some of its earthly grandeur.

The question for everyone becomes: What?s next?

The answer for the moment -- from the Eastern sees that are downsizing to the Western sees contending with growth -- seems to be: Check back with us in a few years and we?ll let you know.

Not that it is all that haphazard. Significant discussions of how to plan for the future have occurred among various national groups and those discussions, say both Couturier and Furlow, inform what is going on at ground level.

It is clear that the institutional structures that Dolan sees as strangling today?s Catholic leaders are being changed by an array of forces, many of which lie outside the control of those same leaders.

Couturier said the primary question is not ?How are our beliefs holding up?? but ?How are Catholics doing? How are they faring?? He acknowledges that increasingly today people can find the church ?largely tangential to the high task of developing character in today?s turbulent world of family, love and business.? He asks, ?How conducive are our Catholic institutions for the transformative work of faith in the postmodern world?? He asks

questions about Catholic ?well-being? and about ?whether our work and our institutions are meeting the needs of our people today, whether they are seen as pastorally healthy, effective and helpful in meeting the concerns of the faithful.?

They are huge questions with no easy or immediate answers. Practically, however, it means that Couturier in the next year will hold 25 consultations in parishes around the Boston archdiocese where the discussion will deal with how pastors can ?pastor differently? and how people and clergy can ?build up a theology of partnership rather than a theology of competition.?

The shifts the church in the United States is experiencing at the start of the 21st century are enormous. Some have been under way for decades, others have hit suddenly, the fallout of scandal. Often the metaphors are taken from nature -- perfect storm, shifting plates -- in an attempt to get at the dimensions. The uncertainties, Couturier said in his speech to New York?s priests, ?are palpable.? But if the ground is shifting, it is also, he concluded, ?the ground on which saints flourish and pastors prosper, when Catholicism engages novelty with its heritage of grace.?

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His email address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

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