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

Cleveland parish remains a community of a different sort

Tom Roberts | Mar. 5, 2012

The congregation sings as Fr. Robert Marrone and Alan Klonowski break consecrated bread for Communion at the Community of St. Peter Feb. 12 in Cleveland. (Photos by Peggy Turbett)

CLEVELAND -- There?s no steeple. No big stained-glass windows or rectory, no signs along Euclid Street announcing service times or the pastor?s name. The big space where liturgy is held, an old warehouse-looking room where it is said they once manufactured electric cars, has been done over in a kind of updated urban chic with religious emphasis. Open metal beams crisscross above the congregation and give way to skylights. Candles are spaced at regular intervals high on the brick walls.

The space takes on an unmistakably sacred character with a crucifix and baptismal font just inside the front door.

The church, as it were, is an indoor courtyard away from office doors bearing such legends as ?Solar Systems Networking Inc.? and ?Arteriocyte Cellular Therapies Medical Systems? and ?Diagnostic Hybrids.?

Somehow, it all seems to fit with this hybrid itself, the Community of St. Peter, born of the painful downsizing of the church in this city, and with this odd place where it finds itself on the church?s landscape.

Once a parish in good standing with the Cleveland diocese and known for distinctive liturgies and a pastor who delivered thoughtful, provocative homilies, St. Peter, since August 2010, has been a community of a different sort, still known for distinctive liturgies and a pastor who delivers thoughtful, provocative homilies.

That ecclesiastical parallelism, for lack of a better term, is one of the elements that make the Community of St. Peter so intriguing. The community, by its very existence, raises devilish questions about what it means to be ?uppercase? Catholic and about the significance of an individual community in the Catholic scheme of things, and about authority in today?s church. In fact, when it became clear that the diocese planned to close the parish, the parishioners essentially told the bishop: ?You can have the building, but you can?t have us.?

On a Sunday morning in early December, the new worship space, the one that the bishop objects to because it is not officially sanctioned, is jammed. It is a largely graying crowd, but it doesn?t take much looking to spot children and younger adults.

An oboist and pianist perform a largo from Handel?s Concerto in G minor. Then the choir, in soft harmonies and with a competence many parishes would envy, intoned: ?Come, come Emmanuel,? the phrase picked up in full voice by the congregation.

The Gospel is the opening lines of Mark and the pastor, Fr. Robert Marrone, begins his homily with a story about conductor Erich Leinsdorf going to the opera with his wife to take in Mozart?s ?Magic Flute.? Hearing the first few measures played, ?Leinsdorf turned to his wife and said, ?Let?s get out of here.? He knew from the very first bars,? Marrone said, ?that this was an interpretation he was not going to like.

?Beginnings tell us a lot about how things must go,? Marrone said. While all the Gospels begin with some accounting of John the Baptist, he said, Mark?s peculiarly terse way of presenting things ?pulls no punches.? The first line, ?Proclamation of Jesus, the anointed one, God?s son,? leaves little to the imagination, he said. Since the original supposition was that one would read the Gospel from beginning to end, not hear it as we do today in snippets or in passages picked out, Marrone said, it is important to go to the last line, ?at least the last line that most scholars consider original?: ?The women ran from the tomb in amazement and terror. They said nothing to anyone because they were scared out of their wits.?

An odd ending, he suggests, for a Gospel that began with such certainty. Why the fear?

He offers three aids in considering the lines:

- First, Jesus nowhere in the Gospel, despite metaphors he used to describe himself, ever attributes such titles to himself, never refers to himself as the son of God.
- Second, ?Jesus did not come to proclaim Jesus. ... Jesus is the proclamation; he proclaims the divine presence breaking into the world. ... We believe that the divine message is incarnated in the person of Jesus -- see the messenger, see the message.?
- Third, ?it is helpful to read the Gospel backwards.? As Marrone sees it, the last line is actually the first line of the story, told from the experience of the empty tomb. The terror of the moment, he said, drives the first witnesses to a reflection on Jesus? life, what he did and said, and ?why we don?t get it.?

?Only then,? Marrone said, ?were they able to write that he was the anointed one, God?s son.?

And he continues to turn the text, and weave the congregants? lives into the story, into an examination of the times they have feared, or run from the tomb, or finally realized that the first line is actually about them, about who we are, once baptized into Christ.

It is enough to say, perhaps, that it doesn?t take work to stay interested, nor does it take much prodding to keep turning the words around and exploring the ideas.

It is not cheap grace he offers, nor has this place, idyllic in the music and soft light of a Sunday morning,

occurred without some cost.

* * *

In interviews and conversations with dozens of community members over several days in early December, the point was emphatically made more than a few times: ?We didn?t leave the church. We were shoved outside because we wanted to stay together.? This separation was not about any of the hot-button issues, as has been the case elsewhere. It wasn?t about ordination of women or married men or anger at what a new pastor was doing. It was about wanting to remain a community.

The story of St. Peter takes on added significance in this era because all over the Catholic lot in the United States new expressions and arrangements of the old parish form are emerging as the weighty edifice of previous decades -- top-heavy with large, unsustainable properties and dependent on a supply of priests, religious women and other resources that once seemed without limit -- begins to buckle under its own weight.

To what degree things will change is an unknown at the moment.

But Marrone, the pastor who decided to remain with his congregation against his bishop?s wishes, believes that St. Peter is not a one-off case. He thinks it may be an example for others facing a similar dilemma.

?This is not doctrinal in the deepest sense,? he said in an interview over dinner one evening. ?I am not denying the divinity of Jesus or the Trinitarian formulas. ... I don?t mean to be histrionic,? he said, and then thumped the table for emphasis, ?but, no, I?m not going to the back of the bus. I?m not going to do this.?

What?s ?this??

?I cannot agree to what you?ve decided to do. It?s wrong,? he said, referring to Bishop Richard Lennon?s decision to close St. Peter Church. ?People?s rights were violated. The rights of the people of the body of Christ were violated. The right to be together. They were not in danger of falling apart. No criterion [on which the closing was based] was genuine.?

An attempt to reach the diocese for comment on the Community of St. Peter and its pastor brought a terse response from Robert Tayek, director of media and public relations, who said in an email that ?it is the policy of the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland not to respond to the *National Catholic Reporter*.?

There is on the record, however, a March 2010 letter from Lennon to members of the congregation, as the parish closing date approached and rumors were circulating that the community might go off on its own. The letter was both a plea to maintain membership ?in the unified body of Christ? and a warning that ?there are consequences which affect one?s relationships with the Lord, with His holy Church, as well as with other members of the faithful,? should that unity be broken. He said he was concerned ?for you and your salvation,? a reference some parishioners perceived as a not-so-veiled threat.

After the Community of St. Peter was established, Marrone said Lennon called him in and gave him 48 hours to leave the community and remove his name and all photos of himself from the community website, or else. That meeting occurred in January 2011. Marrone responded two days later with one sentence: ?It is my decision to stay with the community of St. Peter?s.?

At the time of this writing, Marrone has not heard again from Lennon, nor has the ?or else? ever been spelled out.

Closing parishes and schools is never an easy undertaking, and in Cleveland, where plans called for a net loss of 52 parishes, the jolt was severe. By most parish standards, however, the bond of community was unusually strong and deep at St. Peter. Members speak fondly of gravitating toward it because of rich and meaningful liturgies and homilies. Younger couples, some now married and with children, came to Mass from the nearby campus of Cleveland State University, often recruited by Marrone, and stayed on. They speak fondly of the corporate decisions they made to do some $2 million in renovations to the church building at East 17th Street and Superior Avenue, much of it with sweat equity as parishioners got together to clean, scrape, paint, even laying the expanse of a concrete floor in the church.

Over more than three decades, it went from a moribund place without a full-time pastor to a vital example of Catholic presence in the inner city.

And then the diocese closed it.

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Marrone, with graying hair and a closely trimmed Vandyke, exudes a kind of energy and enthusiasm that becomes infectious. He has a doctor of ministry with an emphasis on liturgy. He understands ritual, its power. He understands how to use the old elements in ways that speak to today, to the lives of those in his congregation. He apparently loves being a pastor, but it?s also easy to imagine him successful in any number of fields. For nearly 40 years, his efforts have gone into the Catholic priesthood.

The assessments from those inside and outside the community -- including some who could not go along with the new community or Marrone?s decision to lead it -- can make him sound like central casting?s pastor for the 21st century. He?s ?smart,? they say, ?charismatic,? ?incredible preacher,? ?great liturgist,? ?knows how to get things done,? ?makes everyone feel welcome,? ?has impeccable taste.?

It?s not all flattery. ?He has an edge,? some say, ?isn?t good at the kind of schmoozing? you sometimes have to do to stay on the good side of authority, ?has always been somewhat outside the diocesan structure,? ?is a bit of a pied piper? and ?was allowed to run a ?boutique? parish.?

Whatever the impression, he hardly presented the profile of someone on a trajectory to make a radical break with the local church.

By most accounts, reaching the point of defying the bishop (?I am in disobedience of my bishop,? Marrone admitted) did not occur quickly or without a lot of consideration. At the core of the dispute, by now well-documented, was the process that Lennon imposed when he arrived from Boston in May 2006. To that point, few would have imagined St. Peter Parish closing. It was solvent, active, growing, and had recently completed renovations. It also had history on its side -- it was the oldest parish in continual operation in the Cleveland diocese and in 2009 had celebrated the 150th anniversary of the dedication of the church. At the height of the parish?s growth, at its closing, it had 300 families -- more than 600 people -- as members. It sponsored celebrated adult education and arts programs, bringing in outside authors and performers. The year before the parish closed, 23 children were confirmed -- by Bishop Anthony Pilla, the former head of the diocese and the one who appointed Marrone pastor of St. Peter.

Lennon?s ?clusters? program grouped the parish with the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist and the Church of the Conversion of St. Paul Shrine, once an Episcopal church that since 1930 has been home for the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. The diocese said that of the three, one of them would close.

It was an easy deduction, former parishioners say. St. Peter was the target and there was no room for negotiating. Parishioners perceived the cluster process, months long, as a sham with a foregone conclusion. Marrone talks about the process as ?the most devastating? episode of his priesthood.

Far different from what occurred with other mergers in the diocese, where parishes talked out how ministries and gifts were to be shared, the diocese gave St. Peter?s parishioners no merger option, no other direction than to disperse and find a new home. In his March 2010 letter, Lennon?s only instruction to parishioners was ?to register at another parish in the diocese.?

?We would lose everything,? Marrone said. ?To just say St. Peter?s doesn?t matter, it doesn?t count, just wipe it out. No that?s wrong.?

* * *

If there was a silver lining in that process, it was that the community ended up with a lot of time to think about its fate and alternatives.

When the parish closing became inevitable, a group formed a nonprofit organization so that members could continue to support the parish?s inner-city ministries -- particularly a highly developed outreach to a public elementary school in one of the poorest sections of Cleveland -- and receive a tax deduction. The donations would remain separate from the diocesan collections.

As the decision -- over months of discernment -- was made to remain a community and rent the space for worship and offices, the 501(c)(3) became the new organization. Leah Gary, a longtime parish member who has considerable experience starting nonprofits, spearheaded the effort.

In an interview, she said the bishop ?underestimated us at every turn. ... We told him the building belonged to him and he could do with it what he wished, that we will live in the hope of the Resurrection.?

That hope is tied inextricably to the community. ?It had to do with people,? she said, giving voice to a sentiment this visitor would hear time and again. ?We wanted to be that community with those people.?

Things evolved as members of the community -- a professional facilitator, experts in human relations and other professionals -- helped in the long discernment process, putting a real-world framework to the growing dream. They developed a compensation package for Marrone and an employee handbook. They developed financial and investment policies and a contract with Marrone that includes performance reviews.

An 11-member board heads the group. The community subscribes to best-practice policies and distributes quarterly financial statements, as well as reports on investments. Gary said the community maintains a strong

reserve fund and requires disclosures of any conflicts of interests of those on the board.

So what is this new entity, and where is it headed? Is it Catholic? Is there life beyond Marrone?

Among the professionals at St. Peter Parish were two theologians, Doris Donnelly and Joan Nuth, who teach at nearby John Carroll University, a Jesuit institution. Each maintains a deep regard for St. Peter, as well as many friends. Neither was able to make the leap with the community.

Donnelly refuses to speak publicly about her decision to find another parish. Nuth was more outspoken, and carefully documented her reasons for not being able to go along with the new community.

Even today, she emphasizes in an email her ongoing admiration for Marrone and for members of the community. Her position was marked out clearly in a letter given to the community as it was discerning which path to take.

?I acknowledge completely the injustice of what has been done to historic St. Peter Church,? she wrote. ?I think the bishop has been completely wrong in what he has done to us. I am furious about the way he has treated Bob,? she said, referring to Marrone. As a Roman Catholic theologian, however, she said she ?cannot in good conscience engage in anything that smacks of schism, which is what it would be if the community hires priests not in good standing with the diocese.?

She said she takes the position of Erasmus, ?who in the 16th century was every bit as critical of the official church as was Martin Luther -- perhaps even more so. But because he valued continuity over schism, he opted to stay, while Luther did not. The rest has been history.?

Conversation is elaborately polite and civil on both sides of the divide. In that original letter she said, ?I do not condemn anyone who chooses to leave,? even though that ?is one step I am unwilling to take.?

In the conversations with community members, the point was repeatedly made that no one thinks ill of those who couldn?t take that step. They said Marrone had made the point, emphatically, as the transition was under way, that the choice was one of individual conscience.

Many were apparently able, however grudgingly, to put aside ecclesiology and church discipline.

The parish closed on Easter Sunday in 2010. There was to have been a Mass the following week, a final liturgy, celebrated by Lennon, as he had at other churches being closed. The community told him that he could celebrate Mass, but that they would not be there. Their final celebration was Easter. They went outside. Locked the doors for the last time, and ended things at St. Peter Parish with a hymn that would be the first sung when, about five months later, they entered their new worship space as the Community of St. Peter.

In the interim they spent the months meeting Sundays for morning prayer, much of the time without Marrone, in a space at Cleveland State University. The fact that more than 200 showed up the first week provided confirmation for the new direction. The community had already rented space on Euclid Avenue, but had to wait for it to be renovated.

When the church closed, said Marrone, whose mother had died the month before, he told the community, ?I don?t have any more to give right now. I?m done. I can?t do anything more. I need some time.?

He had also told them that he was not going to decide what to do next. ?I told them, ?You figure what you?re going to do and then you come talk to me. You get a plan, and then I?ll talk with you. ... I don?t want to be a pied piper.? ?

About six weeks after the church closed, Marrone joined them one Sunday for morning prayer and ultimately agreed to become pastor of the community. He refused to celebrate the Eucharist until they were in their new space. That occurred on Aug. 15.

Nearly a year and a half later, with distance from what must have been the anxiety of those first months together, a somewhat reflective narrative emerges.

?The church itself was so beautiful,? Rosemary Ludway said. ?The liturgies were such a spiritual experience? that when the closing occurred she was ?angry ... mystified ... puzzled ... I was very sad.?

?And when the talk turned to what are we going to do, I was willing to do whatever, however we could maintain [the community]. I was not a person who tolerates change very well, but I was ready.?

She said she felt uncomfortable ?being in a different place? and the question occurred: ?Were we still going to be Catholic?? But she was ?willing to do that because I wanted us to go on ... and we?ve kind of moved the whole experience to an entirely different space.?

And what if something were to happen to Marrone? If he were no longer there to lead?

Joe Konen said he keeps in front of him the phrase that ?the people are the church,? and that catholic means inclusive. ?I believe that it has other meanings, I know that, but that is not what makes me Catholic.? Still he is concerned. He said he wants to remain ?a capital-C Catholic? and believes ?our community has to look for ways to do that. We have to watch that we don?t feel we?re so unique or so special that we have nothing to share with or learn from others.?

In the end, however, community trumps those concerns and he echoes a few others when he says that while Marrone is a kind of primal force in the community there are lots of others -- among them a healthy number of previously active priests and religious women -- who could step into the breach. He also floats an idea that the community might finance advanced religious education, no strings attached, to young people in the congregation interested in ministry, with the hope that some might return to the community to lead the effort in the future.

When Marie Dietrich, a 20-year member of the parish, realized the church was going to close, she was sad but also saw it, she said, ?as a metanoia moment.?

?Our community is going to survive,? she told herself, ?and we?re redefining ourselves as a new form of faith community inspired by the spirit.? She said she wasn?t certain how it would happen but ?trusted the event, that this is a turning point in the definition of what a faith community means and who and what inspires it.?

?We?re not technically a parish anymore,? she continued during one of the group conversations held in a conference room at the new site in early December. ?We?re a strong, visible faith community. The pain was somewhat alleviated by my own inchoate sense that the Spirit is in whatever is transpiring here to go from the hierarchical, ecclesial definition of a parish to a less defined but certainly very potent form of faith community. So it was an evolution that I sense was going on, not knowing what the mechanism was going to be in which it would happen, but that good was going to come out of this transition.?

Perhaps this will be a tale, like Mark?s Gospel, best read in reverse. One gets the sense, however, that first there is still much to be written.

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Source URL (retrieved on *05/02/2016 - 08:09*): http://www.ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/cleveland-parish-remains-community-different-sort