Opinion
News



Young people hold candles during the Easter Vigil April 4 at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, Conn. (CNS/Bob Mullen)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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I have been writing about Catholic pain over parish closings for far too many years.

But recently a letter to the editor in the *New Haven Register* really broke my heart. Responding to Archbishop Leonard Blair's decision to close his parish, John Tranquilli wrote:

> "*St. Joan of Arc, which has been around for 47 years, was a self-sufficient parish. We had no loans, paid for over $500,000 in renovations to the church, rectory, driveway and parish center over the past seven years — all with donations, no loans or help from the Archdiocese. We were one of the leaders (percentage wise) in donations for the Archbishops Annual Appeal each year, and made all required payments to the Archdiocese. We also had very active ministries — Knights of Columbus, CYO, CCD, etc. The only — only — obligation the Archdiocese had was to give us a priest — and they could not complete their one obligation.*"

According to the Hartford Courant, "twenty-six buildings closed under the pastoral plan" of the Archdiocese of Hartford, and "more than 140 parishes were consolidated into 59 new parishes, involving unions of two to six parishes." This downsizing leaves the archdiocese with 127 parishes, a 40 percent reduction. Some Catholics, such as those from St. Margaret of Scotland in Waterbury, and St. Augustine and St. Paul in Glastonbury, are pursuing appeals in Rome, while parishioners at the Church of the Epiphany, in Cheshire, are in the diocesan phase of their appeal.

Over the past ten years, this all-too-familiar scenario has been repeated in one U.S. diocese after another. Currently, in addition to Hartford, the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Archdiocese of New York are also drastically downsizing, while priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago project closing up to 100 churches by 2030. Often, the euphemism "demographic changes" leads the list of justifications for this assault on faithful Catholic communities like St. Joan of Arc.

But the real reason is the pervasive shortage of priests.

Hartford spokesperson Fr. James Shanley publicly admitted what is driving the process there: "The way things look on a single local parish level is very different from when the archbishop looks at the three counties ... and he has to make a plan

with a given number of priests to meet the needs of all those people."

In other words, the fewer the priests, the more likely it is that your parish — no matter how active, vibrant, and ministerially fruitful — will be merged or closed.

I have argued for years that this is a dreadful wag-the-dog policy.

Worse, I have come to regard it as an assault on the body of Christ. Too many bishops have adopted a corporate mentality that views parish communities as so many commercial franchises to be managed, rather than the living body of Christ. This body is made up of believers who are committed to one another through thick and thin, while striving to live the Gospel.

Could this be one reason parishioners in Pittsburgh chose to sue the diocese in civil court?

Good Catholics do not employ such drastic measures unless they are feeling betrayed and wounded to their very core.

I would be the last to say that no parish should ever close. Still, a parish with few worshippers and even less funding should be given a set period of time in which to turn itself around. If nothing changes, then other options must be considered.

But too many vibrant communities — often in the inner city or inner ring suburbs — are closed or merged simply because of their size. If a parish is vibrant, solvent and engaged in effective ministerial outreach, it should not be closed for having just 300 people rather than the 1,200 many dioceses seem to require to stay open.

There is a certain hubris in Shanley's assumption that a priest is the only one "to meet the needs of all those people." I suspect many bishops assume this as well. They either forgot — or never experienced — the gift of parish communities. In Christian communities, the privilege and obligation of mutual love and concern belong to each and all — not only to the priest. We meet each other's needs — sometimes especially when clergy let us down.

After losing their 7-year-old son, Martin and Dee Ethier experienced an outpouring of love and support from their St. Augustine parish community in South Glasonbury, Connecticut. It was, they said, a key factor in their healing process. "That's what family does," said Martin Ethier. With three other parish members, the Ethiers are now appealing Archbishop Leonard Blair's decision to close their parish.

When parish communities are torn apart, the ensuing pain and sense of violation can easily lead to civil suits and lengthy canonical appeals.

Many bishops myopically believe a priest must live in every parish. They assume they have no other option than to break up vital communities.

That is where they would be wrong.

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Recently Cardinal Reinard Marx recently announced he would appoint laypeople to lead parishes in the Archdiocese of Munich when no priest is available. He rejects clustering or merging parishes and told Munich's lay diocesan council that it is important to preserve individual parishes as a way of guaranteeing the church's presence locally. Marx is a member of the pope's inner circle of nine Cardinals who advise him on vital matters in church.

Another member of the pope's inner circle, Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley, is implementing the Disciples in Mission initiative. This ten-year effort aims to keep parish communities together by organizing priests and pastoral ministers in 135 collaborative teams to serve Boston's 288 parishes.

It isn't rocket science.

We need our bishops to realize that parishes are the body of Christ — a living, breathing, loving and serving community.

They are not Starbucks franchises.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.