Opinion
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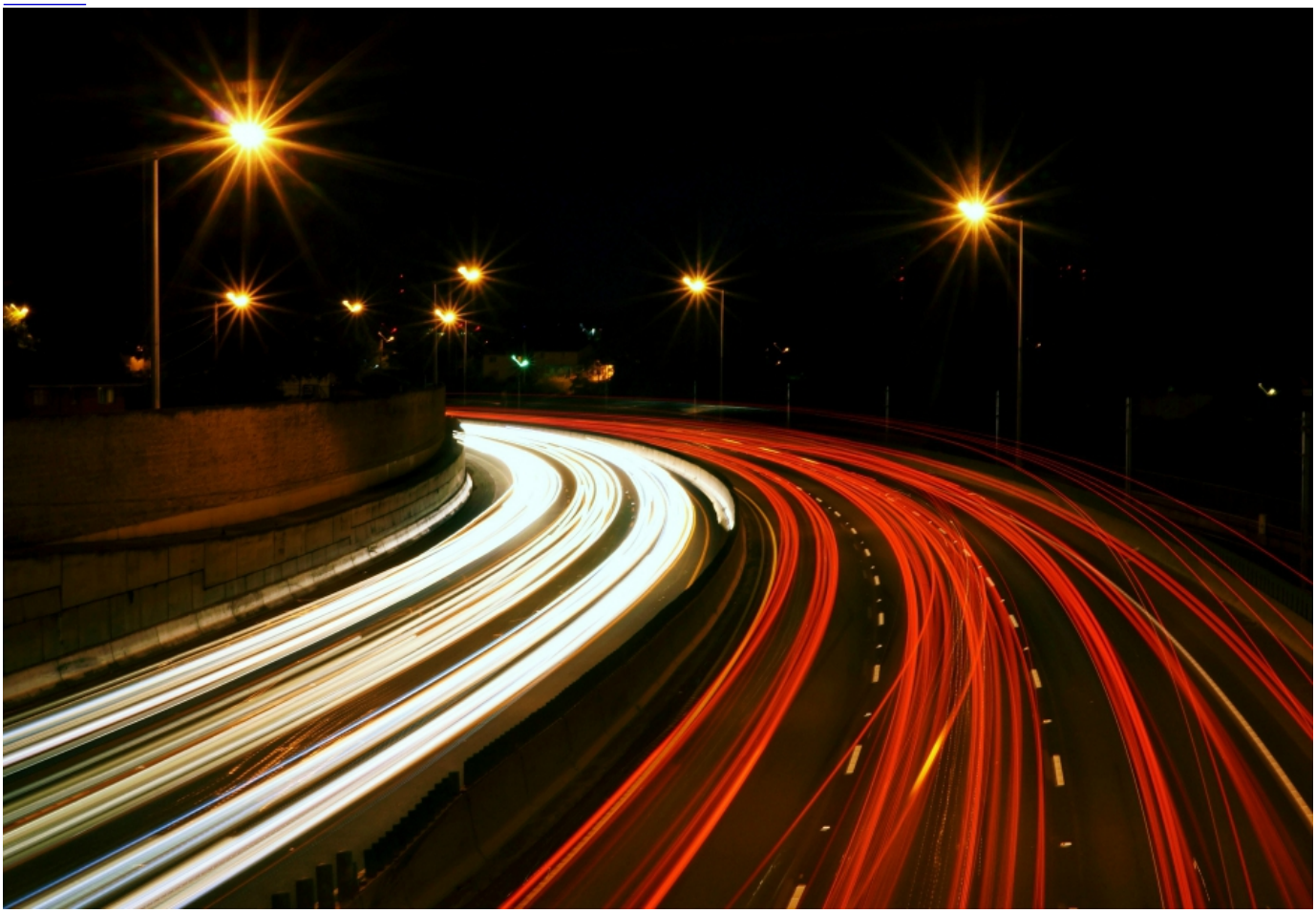

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by Phyllis Zagano

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The Amtrak train that flew off the tracks in the state of Washington the other day was going 80 mph on a 30 mph turn. In recent years, speed killed or injured train passengers in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. It is not wind, rain or locusts. It is speed.

Why are we so invested in hurry sickness?

We can parse the reasons for the derailments, but we cannot deny that we are addicted to speed, and often in a very bad way.

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with efficiency. But too much in life is a race to the finish.

Some things can be done quickly, but that train went too fast.

The same is happening in the church. Diocesan bureaucracy often moves too fast, without checking the options. The problem is the math: one priest = one pastor = one parish.

It doesn't have to be that way.

The church is living a new reality. The numbers are stark and they are real. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), in 1965 there were upward of 58,000 priests in the United States. By 2017, CARA counted just over 37,000. That translates to 3,552 parishes without resident pastors.

What's a bishop to do? There are two broad choices: keep the parish open or close it. But, for too many bishops, the only way to keep a parish open is to place a pastor in it. No pastor, no parish. Simple mathematics makes the decision.

That is going too fast.

Several U.S. dioceses have decided that Canon 517.2 is not such a bad thing. Canon 517.2? That is the part of the Code of Canon Law that allows a bishop to appoint a non-resident canonical pastor for a parish managed by someone else. The canonical pastor could be the vicar general or a neighboring pastor, but the person managing the ministerial life of the parish is the bishop's true representative in ministry. Often

called the parish life director or pastoral administrator, he — or she — coordinates catechesis and social events, looks out for the boiler and the roof, and arranges for the parish's sacramental life.

It is an idea whose time has come. From St. Saviour's Parish in Limerick, Ireland, to Holy Family Parish in South Pasadena, California, as well as in Africa, Asia and Latin America, there are parish life directors and pastoral administrators keeping parish communities together, while concurrently freeing priests for priestly ministry.

The U.S. has a wealth of trained lay ecclesial ministers who can do just that. CARA estimates nearly 40,000 out there, with another 20,000 in training, while dioceses reported 17,772 lay professional ministers to the Official Catholic Directory. Good news? Bad news? In 2017, CARA found only 347 parishes where the bishop has entrusted the pastoral care of the parish to a deacon, religious or layperson.

On the face of it, it seems silly to close vibrant parishes only because there is no priest. That is a bean-counting bureaucratic approach that moves too far too fast. It feeds on entrenched beliefs: no priest, no parish. We always did it this way.

Well, we need to change, or we need to close up shop. In case you haven't noticed, the Catholic Church is collapsing. In too many places, bureaucratic Band-Aids don't even hide the problems. It is not about "covering" Masses. It is not about fewer Masses in larger locations. It is not about social media, or twinning parishes, or even about importing more priests from distant lands and cultures.

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No, it is not about these. It is about ministry. More ministry = more Catholics. More Catholics = more priests. The life of the community cannot be ended just because there is no priest around today. An alive community is exactly what will call forth priests from its midst for tomorrow.

We need more ministry! The simple fact is that ministry is falling off the Catholic cliff into a hollow remembrance of times when individuals felt they were ministered to.

So the old pastor cannot walk down to the post office to hear the news of the parish as he once did. The parish life director can do that. So the canonical pastor cannot be at the parish party. The parish life director will be there. The priest is needed for

sacramental ministry. The parish life director will arrange for it, or help people find it elsewhere.

Someone recently complained to me that the parish life director concept was Protestant. No, I would call it Catholic. There are many ways of building the Kingdom. Closing parishes is not one of them.

Change is coming, as it must. But moving too fast in the wrong direction could derail the whole thing.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. Her books include *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* and *Women Deacons?: Essays with Answers*.]

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