

## Outline of new life

Tom Roberts | Dec. 7, 2010



Twenty-five deacon candidates lie prostrate in prayer during a 2008 ordination ceremony at Sts. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Indianapolis. The men were the first class of permanent deacons in the history of the Indianapolis archdiocese. (CNS/The Criterion/Sean Gallagher)

### [27th and last in a series](#) [1]

Eighteen months ago, I started out on a reporting project that soon became a series and took the name "In Search of the Emerging Church." Twenty-six reports later, looking back through scores of interviews, demographic data, anecdotes and personal experience, what emerges is the outline of new church life, much of it quite healthy, if less fastened than the church has been to traditional clerical structures.

In hindsight, the headline -- Emerging Church -- was, as headlines often are, at least inadequate, suggesting that something whole might be emerging in place of something else. The reality is more complex.

The reporting would take me to Ohio, New Jersey, New Mexico, California and Pennsylvania, and included interviews with experts both inside and outside the Catholic community. What precipitated the project was a conference in Florida in 2009, the culminating event of a four-year study, *Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership*, financed by a \$2 million Lilly Endowment grant. The financing and the study have since been extended. The 1,200 people who showed up at the gathering, most of them lay, and the stories they told clearly demonstrated that change was under way.

The gathering also illustrated a central reality that will, for better or worse, contribute to shaping the future of the church: The U.S. bishops to this point appear to have little interest in using the abundant data that's been collected by Catholic sociologists to construct any national plans for the future of the church. Whether it's the priest shortage or the growth in the number of lay ministers, the surge in the number of permanent deacons, the exodus of millions of Catholics from the church or data tracking the attitudes of Catholics for more than a quarter century, there appears to be little appetite for discussing such trends on a national basis.

The conference in Florida, for example, was not a project of the bishops. It was, instead, a project of six national ministerial groups that serve lay ministers, pastoral planners, deacons, priests, young adult ministers and church personnel administrators, and it was funded by an outside source. Some might suggest that such a gathering

shows the vitality, creativity and independence of Catholic laity. But as we'll see below, in a hierarchical institution, if the bishops don't own the information and do something with it, the data keeps stacking up with little consequence.

One explanation advanced by experienced church observers is that bishops, who value their autonomous status as leaders in their own dioceses, shy from national plans and programs.

Perhaps that backdrop made the meeting in Florida all the more interesting -- it was one of the few truly national conversations going on about the future of the church.

The promise and tensions inherent in the findings were set up by two keynote talks, one by Bishop Blase Cupich, episcopal adviser to the project, and another by Marti Jewell, then director of the project (now assistant professor of theology in the School of Ministry at the University of Dallas). Cupich grounded the efficacy of the study in theology generated during the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. Cupich said laypeople who were increasingly involved in ministry were answering the call to holiness that is part of their baptismal heritage. The new involvement was not merely a response to need resulting from a clergy shortage. "Lay and ordained all have a stake in the future of our church," he said.

Jewell, who described herself as a practical theologian, immediately cut to the bottom line -- or in her case, the last page. "For those of you who like to flip to the last page of a book and read the end of a story right away, I'll tell you what the research concluded," she said. "Parish life as we have known it has changed."

There's no going back, said Jewell, and she noted the growing need for collaboration between priests and lay ministers. The priest work force is smaller and aging, and nearly half of the parishes in the United States currently share a pastor with another parish or mission, she said.

In a 2009 interview with Catholic News Service, she described the concurrent trends of fewer priests, more lay leaders, and closed and merging parishes as "the most amazing paradigm shift" in the history of the U.S. Catholic church. "I think that what we're being asked to do is to redefine our understanding of what a parish is."

## **The numbers**

If there is an equivalent to a force of nature in the church, it is the significant shifts in demographics that have occurred over the past 50 years, most notably the steady erosion in the number of priests and other vowed religious who once served as a solid foundation of the local Catholic community. It became clear during my reporting that any consideration of the future has to begin with a reading of the considerable data available and what it might portend.

The drop in the number of priests, for starters, is an erosion that forecasters began warning about more than 20 years ago. Church leaders at the time belittled the findings or rejected them outright.

The decline in the number of priests is but a leading indicator amid a range of data that begins to paint the picture of how dramatically and in how many ways the church has changed empirically in the last half century.

In the mid-1980s, two sociologists, Richard A. Schoenherr of the University of Wisconsin in Madison and Lawrence A. Young of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, began studying the trajectory of the priest shortage in the United States, a study that resulted in the publication in 1993 of the book *Full Pews and Empty Altars: Demographics of the Priest Shortage in United States Dioceses*. Robert McClory, writing in *NCR*, described it at the time as a "dense sociological analysis" presenting "hard evidence of a 40 percent reduction in the number of active diocesan priests from 35,000 in 1966 to 21,000 in 2005." Schoenherr also projected an increase in the Catholic population from 45 million to 74 million during the same period.

Schoenherr and Young were the first to rigorously document the decline and its implications. It could be argued that the drop in the number of priests, adhering rather closely to Schoenherr's projections, is the single most significant bit of empirical data affecting what shape the church will take in the future. Without priests, it is not possible to conduct a canonically correct eucharistic service, and without the Eucharist, eucharistic communities cease to be.



Schoenherr, who left the active priesthood to marry, in

particular felt the sting of the hierarchy's displeasure with the study's findings. Although the U.S. bishops had helped finance the nine-year research project, they dropped their funding in 1990 following a third interim report to the bishops.

The project was also funded by a \$400,000 grant from the Lilly Endowment.

Three bishops, in a letter to their fellow bishops, downplayed the significance of the findings. Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles declared in 1990, "I reject that pessimistic assessment and feel that the Catholic church in our country has been done a great disservice by the Schoenherr report." He accused Schoenherr of pushing a "personal agenda" opposing mandatory celibacy for priests. Mahony said the study "presumes that the only factors at work are sociology and statistical research. That is nonsense. We are disciples of Jesus Christ. We live by God's grace, and our future is shaped by God's design for his church -- not by sociologists."

Whether Mahony had special insight into God's design for the church is unclear. Schoenherr's statistics and predictions, however, have held up fairly well in the intervening decades. His projections for increased Catholic population were off by some 10 million. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington, the number of Catholics grew to 64.8 million by 2005 and stands at some 65.6 million today. It is likely that Schoenherr did not anticipate the massive exodus of Catholics from the church that has occurred in the interim.

At the same time, the number of active diocesan priests fell to 28,702 in 2005 and to 27,182 in 2010.

That's roughly 6,000-7,000 more priests than Schoenherr's projections, but he wasn't figuring into his calculations the influx of foreign priests. No one at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been tracking that phenomenon of recent years, but the bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection has compiled data on the current number of international priests as part of its mandate to monitor the practices dioceses have in place for protecting children.

According to a report for 2009, a total of 6,146 international priests were serving as active diocesan priests in the United States.

Mary Jane Doerr, associate director of the office, said in a phone interview that the number may not be precise because a few priests may have been counted twice as a result of having moved from one diocese to another. However, she said 6,000 would be a solid number.

If that's the case, then Schoenherr's estimate of 21,000 active U.S. diocesan priests by 2005 was off by only about 2,000.

According to the statistics compiled by the Office of Child and Youth Protection, the diocese with the highest number of foreign priests is New York, with 379, followed by Sacramento, Calif., 166; the Archdiocese of Military Services, 147; and San Antonio, 144.

Among the countries sending the most priests to the United States are India, 797; the Philippines, 682; Ireland 658; and Nigeria, 562.

Other countries frequently listed are Colombia, Mexico, Vietnam, Spain and Poland.

In that same time span, 1965 to 2010, even though there have been significant parish closings in some areas of the country, the number of parishes has grown from 17,637 to 17,958. Simultaneously, the number of parishes without a resident priest pastor has increased from 549 in 1965 to more than 3,400 today. And the number is climbing.

According to CARA data, the number of instances where a bishop has entrusted the care of a parish to a deacon, religious sister or brother, or other layperson rose from 93 in 1985, the first year there was any record of such activity, to a high of 553 in 2005. The number dropped to 517 in 2009.

In considering the priest shortage, one must keep in mind that priests are not evenly spread throughout the country. Some dioceses, like Newark, N.J., are still "priest rich" while in other areas individual priests are handling multiple parishes spread over huge territories.

The priest population is also aging. In 2009, Jewell reported that 70 percent of active diocesan priests were older than 55.

The picture is grim in other categories. The number of priestly ordinations has dropped from 994 in 1965 to 459 in 2010; the number of graduate-level seminarians dropped in that same period from 8,325 to 3,483.

According to CARA data, the number of Catholic elementary schools has dropped from 8,414 in 1975, the first year figures were available, to 5,889 today. The number of Catholic high schools has also declined during the same period from 1,624 to 1,205. The number of Catholic elementary school students has declined from 2.55 million to 1.5 million. Students in Catholic secondary schools have dropped from 884,181 to 611,723.

And a 2008 study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life showed that the Catholic church has lost more members than any other denomination in the country. Dissatisfaction with church teaching and other reasons have caused more than 22.8 million Americans to abandon the church, most often for other mainline denominations. If that 22.8 million were considered as a group, it would be the second-largest denomination in the country after Roman Catholics and well ahead of the next-largest denomination, Southern Baptists.

When *NCR* recently reported on the study, a check with the U.S. bishops' conference showed that no one there was tracking or investigating the phenomenon. However, in a recent interview with *The New York Times*, the newly elected conference president, Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, said reaching out to the millions of disaffected Catholics would be a top priority of his tenure.

Finally, CARA polls in 2000, 2005 and 2010 show that only 22-23 percent of U.S. adult Catholics say they attend Mass once a week or more.

If there is a bright spot in the numbers, it is the increase in the number of trained lay ministers. Jewell, in her

2009 talk, noted that 31,000 lay ecclesial ministers were working 20 hours or more per week in the church and that 10,000 more were in training. Likewise the number of ordained permanent deacons, men who often are accompanied in ministry by their wives and who have an experience of family, has grown from 898 in 1975 to 16,649 today, more than any other country. Only one diocese (Salina, Kan.) does not have permanent deacons, and some dioceses now have more permanent deacons than priests.

### **Doing more with less**

Some years ago the bishop of an extremely remote diocese (he's now retired), with a reputation for pushing the envelope when it came to innovation (many of the parishes in his diocese were run by nuns and laypeople) told me that if I wanted to get a glimpse of the future of the church, I should look to the margins.

Perhaps he understood then what is becoming clear now, that even in the wealthy United States, the church of the future is going to have to do more with less -- from priests and vowed religious to funding for ministries. That understanding is what drew me to inner cities and to two dioceses in New Mexico, where the church is most unlike the iconic but fading institutions of the Northeast and other historic industrial centers. The church in New Mexico is not Irish in origin, for one thing. It is Hispanic, mostly Mexican. It's older by far than the church in the East. It's never been rich and because of geography and culture, the local communities have always enjoyed a degree of autonomy that would be unusual elsewhere.



The series began in May 2009 in Cleveland, a diocese being battered by

a number of the forces reshaping the church in the United States -- population drain, priest shortage, economic woes caused by sex abuse payouts and financial malfeasance. Stepping into the complicated picture in 2006 was Bishop Richard Lennon, who overrode a process of reorganization that was underway by mandating that 29 of the diocese's 224 parishes would close and 41 would merge. As a result, the diocese would end up with 18 new parishes and a net loss of 52. Some of the closings and mergers occurred without incident, but much of the diocese was in an uproar and remains so today. A number of parishes have appealed to Rome to nullify the bishop's orders, a long process that has been unsuccessful in almost all other cases brought by parishioners in other parts of the country.

In a sign of how much things have changed, about 250 members of St. Peter, a highly regarded parish in both church circles and the wider community, decided to organize as a nonprofit, the Community of St. Peter, and continue worshiping in a non-church site after the parish was closed. Bob Zack, spokesman for the group, said, "We want to keep the community. The bishop in numerous articles and statements kept emphasizing that it is the community that's important, not the buildings." So parishioners took him at his word, told him he could have the buildings, but that they wanted to keep the community.

Their pastor, Fr. Robert Marrone, went with them. In the meantime, the parish has appealed to Rome and is awaiting a decision. Lennon has said he'd be willing to dialogue with the group. Zack, in a recent phone interview, said the community is still awaiting an invitation and that Lennon has not taken any formal steps against the community or its pastor.



It is no small irony that Cleveland is also the site of FutureChurch, a group headed

by St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk. The group was one of the first to understand, 20 years ago, the implications of the work of Schoenherr and Young, and began advocating for changes in the rules about celibacy and ordination of women as a way to save parish communities. She is a community organizer at heart and patient by either nature or training. She's in it for the long haul and hopeful, perhaps surprisingly so.

"It is clear that change is happening," she said in a recent phone interview, "and that it is bigger than any of us. We only see different parts of it at any one time. Usually there are bigger energies at work that weave together the future. But one very important thing that I see is that "pay, pray and obey" Catholics are part of the past. If you want the future you have to be part of creating it, it has to be one where the voices of all the people of God, not just bishops and priests, have a say."

The extreme positions taken by some bishops in the last decade and a half may hasten change, she said. Such actions, she said, "have led to more Catholics saying we have to resist this and be about a different kind of church because that's not working anymore."

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Read all the installments of Roberts' series on the Emerging Church at [NCRonline.org/blogs/in-search-of-the-emerging-church](http://NCRonline.org/blogs/in-search-of-the-emerging-church) [1].

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