

WILL THE PARISH SURVIVE? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE TRADITIONAL PARISH SYSTEM

By

Florencio Testera, O.P.

Whenever people group together for a common purpose some type of organized interaction or structure develops. The emerging structure determines in a more or less formal way the role and responsibility of every member within the community, it delineates the authority of its leaders, and, above all, it serves to protect the interests and freedom of the individual members.

The people of God is no exception to this sociological rule. Structures of worship, administration and mission are essential elements in the life of any christian community. The believers, too, must group into a unit — a parish, local church — to share the same religious values and live them out individually and in their respective local church or community.

It is precisely this structural nature of the parish — an institution subject to change and revision like any other type of structure — what has lately given origin to some basic questions related to the viability and relevance of the existing parish system. Should the traditional-territorial parish system be viewed as a totally irrelevant and obsolete institution and as such be abolished, or can it still be salvaged and somehow revitalized to continue serving the spiritual needs of the faithful in the christian community? Are there any valid alternatives to the centuries-old parochial system? What is the future of the territorial-residential parish?

These and other questions of a similar nature are being frequently raised in modern christian communities and local churches and surely all are worthy of an adequate answer. This is what this brief study shall endeavor to do.

1. The Traditional Parish System

Traditionally, the make up of a parish has been determined by the territory within which it was established and by the amount of income sufficient in itself to cater to the material needs of the clergy, the up-keep of church buildings and the funding of its religious activities and projects.

This type of territorial parish is not an institution of recent origin having emerged in the early centuries of christianity as an answer to the urgent need of providing spiritual care to christians living in the rural communities. Truly, at this early date the christian message had not yet reached the far-flung villages or pag in the countryside and thus christian life flourished mainly in big urban centers. The spiritual needs of the community were attended to from the presbyterium or house of priests where the bishop and his clergy — priests and deacons — led some sort of communal life and shared the responsibility of the pastoral care of the community of the faithful.¹

Unfortunately this pattern of shared-pastoral-ministry did not last for long. When christianity reached the age of emancipation under Constantine, numerous christians had already moved out into the country-side and were settling in model communities making it necessary for a clergyman to follow them to tend personally and directly to their personal needs. This new type of rural ministry was entrusted to a priest-member of the city presbyterium, a fact that accounts both for the gradual desintegration of the presbyterium itself and for the emergence of territorial parishes where the clergy were forced to live in isolation deprived of the benefits formerly enjoyed in the city communal life.²

The secularization of church property in the eighth and ninth centuries — under the pressure of gallic and germanic regimes — shaped up the final structure of the territorial parish and gave a fatal blow to the common life practice of the clergy. Under those regimes all church buildings and land-holdings became the property of the secular power, the king and the nobles being the big landlords. The bishop's authority over his priests and their parishes dwindled notably as the care-taker priest of the local church was chosen, hired and paid for by the landlord whose tenants composed the parish.³ Under this system the pastor of a particular territory had exclusive rights over his flock. The faithful were enjoined to worship in the parish church, to confess to the parish priest, to receive easter communion from his hands, and to be married and buried by him.⁴

¹ D'Ercole, G., *The Presbyterial Colleges in the Early Church*. Concilium, VII (Sept., 1966), pp. 13-15;

Rahner, K., *Bishops: Their Status and Functions*, London 1964, p. 48.

² Barberena, Tomás G., *Collegiality at Diocesan Level: The Western Presbyterate*. Concilium, VIII (Oct., 1965), p. 15.

³ La Due, W. J., *Structural Arrangements of the Parish*. The Jurist, XXX (1970), pp. 315-318.

⁴ Neill, Th.; Schmandt, R., *History of the Catholic Church*, Milwaukee, 1957, pp. 163-165.

These exclusive parochial prerogatives — linked to the land or territory — prevailed to the late part of the seventeenth century when Clement X (1670-1676) acknowledged the right of the faithful to receive the sacraments, in some cases, from many other parish priest.⁵ Earlier the Council of Trent had introduced some pertinent legislation setting new controls and establishing a more effective rapport between the bishop and his priests. Many of the abuses of the middle ages were thus corrected and the reform of the parish became a most welcome reality. The residential or territorial principle — every parish with its pastor — continued to gather momentum as the decrees of Trent still favored territorial parishes over other kinds of parochial units envisioned by the Council itself.

Neither did the social and cultural upheavals of the nineteenth century bring about any substantial change in the structural formation of the parish. As a result the urban parish did not fare quite well during the industrial revolution of those times as it failed to cope with the pastoral needs of people who ceaselessly poured into the large cities in search of better job opportunities.

Notwithstanding the languid state and performance of some of the large urban parishes operating under the territorial system, the legislation of the 1918 Code of Canon Law still adhered to the old territorial principle when it decreed that the place of residence should be the norm of parish affiliation or membership, (c. 94.1-3). Under the new law, however, the parishioner enjoyed greater freedom of action since he was allowed to worship in churches other than his own parish, (c. 467).

The contribution of Vatican II towards a meaningful restructuring of the parish system was rather limited. The Council simply adopted the existing criteria of territory, nationality, language, rite, etc., in the formation of new parishes.⁶ This oversight of Vatican II, however, is compensated fully with the implementing rules of the Council's decrees regarding parishes, by which the bishop is endowed with power to ... "change parishes in any way whatever after he has heard the views of the council of priests."⁷

2. *Alternatives to the Territorial Parish.*

An increasing number of catholics no longer find a meaning in the traditional parish system. Territorial groupings, it is averred, are frequently artificial and warping pastoral units and as such can

⁵ Blochlinger, A. *The Modern Parish Community*. N.Y., 1965, p. 90.

⁶ Vatican Council II. *Christus Dominus*, n. 23.

⁷ *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*, n. 21.

not offer the christian an opportunity to express forcefully and live fully the communal dimension of their faith. This apparent dismal performance of the territorial parish is in part due to a contemporary phenomenon which is graphically summed up in the modern paradoxical adage: "people no longer live where they live" which C. Williams elaborates thus:

"By an accelerating centrifugal motion, more and more aspects of life have been separated from the community of residence... To a great extent our decisions are made, our energies expended and our anxieties are formed away from home. The Church, however, is still centered as residence, and has this time apparently failed to change its shape to meet the changing patterns of secular life".⁸

This growing dissatisfaction with the residential parish of good by-gone days accounts for the rise and proliferation of independent 'new communities' and 'local churches' within the parish territory itself. These new developments are viewed by the local parish as a constant, positive threat to its own existence, as more and more of its dynamic members join such 'floating' and 'underground' communities weakening, as a result, the parish program of activities. A question in point, therefore, could be the following: is the traditional parish still a functional, pastoral unit or should it be rather discarded now as an obsolete institution no longer viable in the present sociological milieu? Or put in another way, can the territorial structure of the parish still offer an answer to the varied needs of modern urban communities, or rather it has become imperative to search for new pastoral alternatives more suited to the demands of our times?

Indeed many of our parishes today both in the cities and in the countryside are too large to be able to provide its faithful with truly personalized services. It is in this context that the existing parish system is actually criticized for its **supermarket** approach to the sacraments and for a similarly **depersonalized** approach to the pastoral ministry.⁹

Despite such shortcomings and criticisms, however, the centuries old principle, "one pastor to each parish", is the prevalent system sanctioned by canon law, (c. 460,2). But the fact remains that it can hardly be considered adequate for most present-day conditions and problems. The "all-knowing" and "all-doing" pastor of olden times is now becoming a relic of history. Contemporary parish

⁸ Williams, C., *Where in the World?*, N.Y., 1963, pp. 7-8.

⁹ Provost, H. J., *Structuring the Community*, Chicago Studies, XV (1976) p. 272.

administration and ministry has branched out into specialized fields such as post-Vatican II liturgy, catechesis, marriage, and vocational counselling, social works and public relations, even financial and labor management and administration of other temporal goods and interests, that the running of a big parish has become a herculean task. And the branches of such parish activities are indispensable pastoral functions brought about by contemporary sociology, theology, liturgy, economics and even cybernetics.¹⁰

Due to such shortcomings and limitations in the present parochial set-up many concerned catholics believe that the time is up to introduce certain modifications, even drastic reforms, into the centuries old parish tradition. Some quarters, in fact, advocate that the big parishes should be split into smaller units, and that new parish ministries be introduced such as the permanent deaconate, the team-ministry, and other similar one to minister to such handier units.¹¹

Still others would preferred the christian community to move away from being parish-centered. As Wessels says: "There will still be parishes organized along traditional lines which will focus on the needs of the family group, but there will also be other pastoral units—ministries through institutions such as hospitals, schools and prisons; ministries in bussiness and industry; ministries through political processes; ministries in crisis situations such as civil rights, poverty and war; ministries to literary and artistic communities. The basic faith-community of some people may not be the geographical parish but the busness, artistic or political community of which they are members. Others may belong to several different communities and share in the ministry and worship of each of these groups. The christian mission is to transform the world, and the Church's ministry must be present in every aspect to the world that must be transformed"¹²

A third and indeed a more radical group advocate a totally new brand of pastoral ministry and practice which will be based on commitment rather than along geographical lines, as — they allege — the needs of contemporary life seem to demand.

The alternatives to the old parochial system can be as many as the major concerns and pastoral objectives for which the new local communities are being organized. In some countries, for

¹⁰ Suenens, L. J., Cardinal, *Corresponsibility in the Church*. N.Y., 1968, pp. 99-100; La Due, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

¹¹ Coriden, J. A., *Ministry*. Chicago Studies, XV (1976), p. 306.

¹² Wessells, C., *Ministry: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, The American Ecclesiastical Review, 1973, p. 273.

instance, the mission thrust has become the main consideration in establishing pastoral units. In other places it may be an ecumenical commitment. Still in others the development of a community-experience for people alienated in a fragmented society may be the basis for restructuring the traditional parish.¹³

Any of those alternatives could suit one or other part of the catholic world. However, the development or elaboration of these methods or systems of pastoral ministry should be meticulously planned at the diocesan and higher — metropolitan or regional — levels.

3. *The Parish — a Community of Believers.*

The Church has often been seen in an institutional setting much like a political entity drawn from civil experience. Today, scholars are shifting from the institution-concept of the Church to a community-centered-perspective.

From this new perspective the people of God is actually viewed as a community of believers hierarchically structured but equal "in one Lord, one faith and one baptism" and sharing responsibility for the life and mission of the Church itself.

In a like fashion and at a local, diocesan level, the parish can be viewed as a community of believers who are gathered together by the preaching of the gospel and for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ It is here at the level of the local assembly where the Church as a community comes into being in its most visible form, as the faithful unite to partake in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The concept of the Church as a communion is deeply rooted in tradition and stems from a sacramentarian source — baptism.¹⁵ Local and particular communities, dioceses, parishes, assemblies of priests, bishops' conferences, synods and the like rise within the framework of the universal Church and mould themselves — through a canonical structure — to the nature of the great ecclesial, hierarchical community and to their own pastoral needs.

These local communities organically united among themselves and with the universal Church are not merely administrative units

¹³ Provost, H. J., *op. cit.*, p. 273.

¹⁴ Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 4; *Conclusions of the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church*, Boletín Eclesiástico, LII, (1978), p. 18; Coriden, J., *The Once and Future Church*, N.Y., 1975, p. 268 ff.

¹⁵ Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11; Barberena, T. G., *op. cit.*, pp. 11-18.

but permanent structural realities, different colleges, each with its own collegial actions and liturgical functions.¹⁶ Thus the theological term communion leads to the canonical term college. The communion with its theological implications and corollaries — solicitude, solidarity and fraternity — will adopt canonically the term collegiality, collegial character and nature, collegial union. The liturgical actions of the communion will become collegiate acts, and the relationship between communities will be the fruit of collegiate ties of love.¹⁷ In short, collegiality is, in its first and deepest meaning, a matter of community.

The collegiality principle so profusely permeates the conciliar decree *Lumen Gentium* that one can safely consider it the most influential way of thinking about the Church at the Council. On a pastoral level too, perhaps the greatest impact of Vatican II was "the rediscovery of the people of God as a whole, as a single reality, as a community, and then, by way of consequence, the corresponsibility thus implied for every member of the Church".¹⁸

It is a well-known fact that the Council's teachings on collegiality refer mostly to the bishops who together with the Roman Pontiff form the episcopal college and share the responsibility of the Church's government all throughout the world. But this principle of shared responsibility — corresponsibility — applies equally though in a different sense, to all institutions and individuals in the Church. Together they are the Church, the people of God, so they must share in this genuine responsibility both in the local community and in the universal Church. This same line of thought leads us logically to conclude that the Church which is collegial in its nature and origins, must be collegial too in its structure and government even at the grass-root levels.

Perhaps, no one will dare openly to question the validity of his doctrine and its corollaries. In fact the return of the Church to collegiate ideas and systems is at present regarded as a matter of necessity and urgency. As a case in point one could mention the great achievements of modern technology. These amazing accomplishments are not the result of an individualism that shuns or rejects cooperation, but are rather the product of a common and united effort of peoples and nations. The Church must work and

¹⁶ Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8, 9, 10, 11, 23; *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 44.

¹⁷ Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium*, n. 22, 23; Urresti, T. J., *The Ontology of Communion and Collegial Structures in the Church*, Concilium, VIII (1965), pp. 5-10.

¹⁸ Suenens, L. J. Cardinal, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

labor within the new sociological concept. Today's pastoral effort must be a collegial, corporate effort or it will be neither pastoral nor successful.

In step with these developments of our times, there has been in the Church an evident trend towards experimentation on institutions and activities of a collegial nature such as episcopal conferences, priests' assemblies, pastoral councils, the CELAM of Latin America, the MISEREOR movement of the German hierarchy and many others. With what results? Available though limited statistics seem to show that while corporate or collegial bodies functioning under the direction of bishops' colleges or conferences have been usually successful in their undertakings, the collegial experiments carried on a local, diocesan level have fared rather poorly. Reports emanating from different parts of the world witness to the meager results so far attained by such institutions as senates' of priests, pastoral councils, parish and particular communities, team ministries and the like. And why?

Perhaps the main reason for this lack-luster showing of such diocesan bodies can be traced to a doctrinal and even technical vacuum along this new post-Vatican II development. For a while Vatican II formulated a set of clear and definite theological principles regarding the bishops' collegiality, on the other hand little has been said, and that in a rather ambiguous manner, of the presbyterial college. Such lack of doctrinal basis makes it difficult for the lawmaker to frame the juridical structure and find the technical formulae best suited to bring to life diocesan and parochial institutions and communities. And yet, a legal formulation of collegiality at this lower level is a "must". Unless and until this confusion and ambiguity were cleared up and remedied, all ongoing experiments on local communities and churches are bound to fail.

Moreover, a radical change in attitudes of both clergy and laity is needed if any sort of collegiate activity is to become an essential part of the Church's life in this modern world. The dream-parish where all believers — clergy and laity alike — will feel responsible for, and become a part of the decision-making process in matters that affect the whole community, cannot materialize unless a new spirit of cooperation and shared responsibility should imbue and permeate the ecclesial community. As it is, however, collegiality at the parish level is still struggling in its infancy. For it to mature more time is needed, suitable forms and structures are to

be discovered and, above all, new attitudes must grow and develop in the community. We can but hope for that day to dawn when the future generations of christians will see and enjoy the fruits of such collective efforts.

4. *The Future of the Traditional Parish.*

The territorial or local parish is indeed the normal and the most frequent type of mission in the christian community. This fact, moreover, does not rule out the possibility of other forms of pastoral ministry structured along lines of nationality, language, rite, etc., of the individuals.

Whatever the structural principle of a parish or pastoral unit might be, it still remains a fact that all types of parochial mission are subject to change and revision. For the parish, like any other form of structure, necessarily relates to people, time and place and as such its institutional framework may be changed for, or substituted by any other form of ministry if and whenever the signs of the times and the needs of the people so demand.

Based on the foregoing argumentation some quarters have started raising this sort of question: can the traditional parish still survive or should it give way to new structures and contemporary types of mission as those sprouting or existing in not a few ecclesial communities?

Seemingly the traditional parish system can and will survive. At least that is the line of thought that runs all through the ongoing revision of church law. Truly, the centuries-old pattern of the residential parish is still retained in the proposed new law. The parish, it is decreed, should still be territorial, though the bishop may, after consulting with his council of priests, establish personal parishes based on nationality, rite or any other determining factors. Likewise, the old rule "one pastor to every parish", shall still be enforced, but a new notion of team-ministry is introduced to cater to special pastoral needs of a particular parish or of a group of parishes.¹⁹

Obviously, the thrust in the proposed new legislation is still geared to the territorial type of parish. Indeed, the residential arrangement makes for good order which is, as in anything else, the underlying principle in all coordinated action and progress. Admittedly, the old structure has its own share of flaws and pitfalls, though not all shortcomings are a part of the system itself.

¹⁹ *Communications*, I/1976, pp. 23-24.

some having to do with the scarcity and skills of personnel, lack of financial resources, etc. Nevertheless there is an urgent need to institute certain organizational changes and to introduce contemporary administrative skills in order to update and, to some extent, to revitalize the life of the parish itself.

Once and again it has been averred that the parish as a pastoral unit is too large, spread — out, and besides it frequently becomes inadequate administer to the growing needs of the people. Doubtless a parish large in land area or membership, or in both, is not conducive to an intensive christian life for it cannot provide its flock with a sense of belonging and with satisfactory, sustained service. Thus the existing giant parishes perforce must be subdivided into smaller pastoral units. This in itself is not a threat to the very existence of the parish which, after all, is made up of small communities politically and socially grouped in a baryo, sitio, barangay, etc.²⁰

The "split-up" of large parishes into smaller units can be carried out in various forms and fashions. One of such forms could be the erection of personal parishes based on race, language, religion or even commitment. This implies the establishment of local churches within the parish territory which will minister to particular groups of people such as university communities, hospitals and prisons, religious movements and so on and so forth. The same or similar salutary results can be attained through an effective assimilation and or incorporation into the parish blood-stream of communities, associations, groups and religious movements already existing within the parish. This way dormant parish associations could be revitalized, and new religious movements — christian basic communities, charismatic groups, ecumenical and catechetical clusters, etc., — could serve the parish ministerial interests while achieving in the process their peculiar objectives.

The inadequacy of large, urban parishes to serve the needs of their flock is so obvious that one needs not harp on it. Several proposals have been advanced to remedy and counteract such anomalous situation. But most of such proposals boil down to the reapportionment of parochial services and the establishment of specialized parishes.

The reapportionment pattern in the parochial functions would imply an expansion of diocesan services and a reduction of those entrusted to the parish. In short, the ministerial responsibilities

²⁰ Purcell, J., *Small Christian Communities*, Boletín Eclesiástico, LII (1978), pp. 68-72.

of the parish would be limited to ordinary or routine preaching, elementary catechesis, varied and meaningful liturgical celebrations, the administration of the sacraments, the organization of unsophisticated associations, and the management of local works of charity. Other types of ministerial services requiring special training and uncommon talents such as adult education, therapeutic and marriage counselling, the establishment and operation of rather sophisticated social undertakings and the like, should be the exclusive concern and responsibility of diocesan or regional groups or organizations. Religious communities and lay associations should be called upon and commit themselves to this sort of specialized mission.

Within this master plan, no parish should attempt to answer all the needs of the people living within its territorial boundaries. Instead each parish should be allowed to develop its own life-style as would appeal to a certain segment of the people living in the region. One parish, for instance, may specialize itself in liturgy and catechetics and so give fulfillment to those in search of new dimensions in these fields. Another parish could direct its thrust to traditional patterns of worship and so appeal to persons inclined to this kind of ministry. A third one could emphasize its social action programs and so on and so forth.

In fine, the possibilities for the reorganization and improvement of the existing parochial system are rather limitless. The main consideration or criterion therefore is that, whatever new structure might emerge herefrom, the end-results should prove strong and stable enough to provide protection for the religious life and freedom of the faithful and to respond abundantly to their pastoral and spiritual needs.