



Multiple Parishes

by Patrick Lencioni

Something is going on in the Church in America, and other parts of the world, I'm sure, that seems at first glance to be primarily structural or administrative. What I'm referring to is the trend toward combining parishes into clusters or families in order to stretch our clergy after years of declining vocations.

A business-person might suggest that the Church simply close enough parishes to make the numbers work. But the Church is not a business and shouldn't be managed like one. Solving this problem of managing parishes is, like the Church Herself, a supernatural challenge, and the way it is addressed can have a profound impact on vocations and the spiritual life of the Church. So, it must be approached with great prayer and care.

There are so many moving parts and aspects to this challenge that it is hard to know where to begin. Sometimes it is good to start thinking about a strategy by understanding what must be protected at all costs and moving forward from there. And what seems to me to be the most worthy 'thing' for protection is the vocations of holy, faithful priests.

And while that word 'vocations' is often thought of in terms of young men who will answer the call to the priesthood in the future, it must also include the care of those who have already answered that call.

I think that one of the first things we have to address, or perhaps acknowledge, is that there is a difference between a priest and a pastor. Let's take a look at that.

One of the biggest changes that has happened in parish life over the past few decades is the speed at which priests are being asked to become pastors relatively soon after their ordinations. From a completely practical standpoint, this makes sense. As more priests retire, the need for more pastors means more promotions.

The challenge here again, I think, is that the call to the priesthood is not the same as the call to be a pastor. It's at this point we should define our terms.

Generally speaking, a priest is a person who answers the call to the Sacramental life. He is the only man in the world who can call down Christ in Mass (thank you, Sr. Bethany Madonna for reminding me of this recently), who can absolve us from our sins, and who can perform a host of other priestly duties. This cannot be adequately described in a mere sentence, nor can it be overestimated in its importance. A faithful, holy priest is a treasure. Full stop.



A pastor, on the other hand, is a priest who oversees a parish. This includes, of course, his extremely important priestly duties, but also involves a handful of other activities related to leadership, management, decision-making and planning.

The big question that must be answered is this: Is it possible that some men are called to be priests but not pastors? I think the answer is a resounding 'yes'. The problem is, more and more or our priests are seemingly being asked to be pastors regardless of whether it is their calling. And that is to say nothing of whether they are receiving the training and development they need to do it well. It almost seems that we've come to see becoming a pastor as the natural evolution of the priesthood within the context of a diocese.

It isn't hard to see how this could impact vocations, both current and in the future. Current priests who become pastors and who aren't called to that life or aren't prepared for it, can easily burn out and experience a diminished connection to their original calling. Running meetings, refereeing conflict between ministries, and hiring or firing employees pulls them away from the spiritual calling and leaves them wondering what they signed up for. Saying Mass, hearing confession, teaching the faith to people in need can start to feel like secondary activities, which of course is nothing short of a tragedy.

This can impact future vocations too, as seminarians and other young men considering the priesthood interact with many of these burned out pastors and can easily question their own calling. There was a reason they didn't go to business school or take over the family business, and if being a manager of an organization is the day-to-day reality of their future role as a priest, it might be easy to second guess their calling too.

Thankfully, there are some, even many priests who can embrace their roles as pastors, in addition to their priestly vocation. The problem is that there probably aren't enough of them to "staff" every parish. And so, we see the trend of grouping parishes into clusters or families.

Now, even if the numbers were to add up in this way and there were enough called and qualified priests to cover all the parish clusters in the country (and I suspect that they don't) there is the matter of training and developing. It is not an easy task to train a priest to be a pastor, and it wasn't an easy task ten and twenty years ago before this clustering trend began. Whatever shortcomings we had in pastor training before, today it will be exacerbated as pastors now have to manage multiple sites, multiple parish cultures, and diverse sensitivities of priests and parishioners who are attached to their original parishes.

This kind of structural change would be a challenge for the secular companies I work with, the ones that are staffed with managers who are trained and whose full-time jobs are leadership and management. Adding multi-site responsibility and cultural challenges to a leader's plate in a business is hard enough. Doing it within a parish environment is much, much more



challenging as pastors already have significant spiritual and Sacramental responsibilities, and as sensitivities in parish life are more nuanced than in other organizations.

So, what are we to do?

I don't know. But I am sure the first step is prayer. The Church has faced challenges from the beginning, and God is the Divine Healer and Problem Solver. We will find answers on our knees more than in management textbooks.

The second step may involve what I would call 'messiness'. We may have to try a few different things. And we probably can't expect a simple, one-size-fits-all solution. Not right away. And the Church isn't organized to do things in this way. We are a collection of dioceses that are more independent than most lay people realize. Given all that, here are a few ideas, for whatever they are worth.

- First, maybe we should think about adding more leadership and management courses to seminaries. This seems long overdue. Gone are the days when a pastor had four priests in the same rectory, along with a cook, an administrative assistant, and hordes of parishioners whose top priorities were volunteering. Our priests need preparation for what they are likely to face. I realize that some seminaries already do this, but too often the focus is on finances and canon law, not the interpersonal dynamics of leading and managing people around the most important mission in the world.
- Second, maybe we should be clear that some priests shouldn't have to be, and probably shouldn't be, pastors. That is not a criticism of those priests. It is an acknowledgment that the Sacramental, Supernatural call to the priesthood is paramount. A good priest is precious, and the core of his duties are saying Mass and performing the Sacraments. These supernatural responsibilities can and should never be overlooked or taken for granted or diminished because of structural challenges. And for those priests who already have the title of pastor, perhaps we need to distinguish between a Sacramental pastor, someone who oversees a mission church where the Sacraments are administered, and a Sacramental and Program pastor, one who oversees a cluster of parishes and is therefore responsible for developing programs and ministries that go beyond the Sacraments.
- Third, maybe it's time to consider a formal role for faithful, obedient, professional lay leaders who are good at management and who can handle the non-Sacramental responsibilities of running a parish. Of course, this would have to be done under the authority of the pastor, and it would have to involve serious development around all matters of parish life, including the teachings of Christ and the Church. But perhaps it's time that we tapped into the organizational talents of people who are not called to be priests or pastors, but who want to serve the Church in this way, and who are good at it.



Okay, each of these ideas is fraught with questions about ‘how to go about doing that?’ Perhaps some diocese will figure out how to make or more of them work and then others can follow suit. Probably there are other ideas that will come in trial and error. Whatever the case, God wants His Church to succeed, and He will be our guide.

So, let’s begin to pray and talk about all this as a Church.