

## **A Place for Communion: Reflections on an Ecclesiology of Parish Life**

Theological Studies  
2017, Vol. 78(4) 825–849  
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DOI: 10.1177/0040563917731746  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



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### **Abstract**

Theologians have demonstrated curious restraint in assigning theological meaning to the parish. I argue here for a renewed attention to the parish as an “ecclesial place,” that is, a geographical site situated in particular contexts where ecclesial relationships of communion unfold by the power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of God’s mission. Simply put, parishes function—or at least ought to function—as the places where “histories of communion” are manifested in the context of grace and struggle in the real world.

### **Keywords**

church, communities, fellowship, minorities, parish

**T**he canonical parish has existed more or less in its present juridical form since the Council of Trent. Yet theologians have exercised curious restraint in assigning theological meaning to the parish. Particularly before Vatican II, there was a tendency to attribute no ecclesiological significance to the parish at all. It was the ecclesial equivalent of a township—a small geographical subunit. Yet for much of the world’s Catholic population before and after Vatican II, the parish or something akin to it has functioned less like territory and more like an ecclesial place—a concrete and situated location where Sunday liturgy and a host of other ecclesial activities take place. With the 1983 Code of Canon Law, canonists moved to describing the parish as a stable

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community of the faithful.<sup>1</sup> Without jettisoning this notion of community completely—and without insisting on the need for a universally held theology for the parish—I argue here for a renewed attention to the parish as an “ecclesial place,” that is, a concrete, culturally and ecclesially situated geographical site where ecclesial relationships unfold by the power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of God’s mission in that locality. Such relationships unfold under the guidance of ordained and lay pastoral leaders cooperating in the empowerment of the baptismal priesthood of all present. Simply put, parishes function—or at least ought to function—as places where “histories of communion” occur in the concrete world.

Karl Rahner first referred to the parish as *place*, that is, the place where the Church as event is manifested.<sup>2</sup> But in Catholic theology, no place operates independently. The parish as ecclesial place always exists in a web of ecclesial relationships—with its own people, with its pastor (*parochus*), its bishop and diocese, with other Christian faith communities near and far, even with those who have departed from this world. Communion ecclesiology can provide us with an important ecclesial tool to dissect and appreciate the parish as a relationally positioned ecclesial place, but only if communion is seen as a process unfolding in history—not a static condition supervised by the bishop and clergy. The parish should be instead a kind of story of communion unfolding in a particular geography. This approach to the parish offers us a clear ecclesiological vision of the position of the parish in Catholic life but also enables us to interpret contemporary parish life, discerning its lights and shadows. First, however, we need to understand why Catholic ecclesiology has so often neglected a theological consideration of the parish.

## Minimizing the Local

Historically, since ecclesiological reflection *per se* began in the West in the fifteenth century, Catholic thinkers have focused most of their attention on the ecclesial significance of the universal Church, later in contradistinction to a more localized emphasis among some of the Reformers.<sup>3</sup> Bernard Prusak describes this as the result of a gradual medieval shift in ecclesial images: “The biblical and patristic vision of Church as ‘the body of Christ,’ which focused on Eucharistic communities, each presided over by a bishop serving as a personal symbol of sacramental unity, was replaced by a concept of Church as *corpus christianorum*, the corporate body of Christians as an organization unified by authority.”<sup>4</sup> The centralizing strategies of the Gregorian Reform had

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1. Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), c. 515 §1.
  2. Karl Rahner, “Theology of the Parish,” in *The Parish from Theology to Practice*, ed. Hugo Rahner (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1958), 23–35.
  3. James Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition: History, Theology, and Canon Law* (New York: Paulist, 1997), 41.
  4. Bernard Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiologies Through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 2004), 230.

succeeded to some extent, and late medieval debates concerned not whether or how the Church was a single corporate body but rather under whose authority it held together. Scholastic theologians saw the episcopacy not as a sacrament of ecclesial unity but as a power of jurisdiction (for Aquinas, a power delegated by the pope). Late medieval Christians thus thought of dioceses as administrative units rather than churches.<sup>5</sup>

Yet in this centralizing milieu, the European parish took on new life. The agricultural revolution of the mid-to-late medieval period allowed for the establishment of villages and then towns, and parishes developed in these places, independent of feudal authority and more influential in people's daily lives.<sup>6</sup> Conflicts over the jurisdiction (and thus income) of pastors ensued. The Council of Trent, in its attempt to eliminate these and other power abuses by the clergy, required the establishment of clear parochial boundaries. Meanwhile, the biblical translations of the Reformers rendered the Greek word *ekklesia* in terms that suggested local community—Luther chose *Gemeinde* and Tyndale *congregation*.<sup>7</sup> Their renewed focus on the local faith community as church influenced Catholic reformers to move in the opposite direction. The church was the universal Church. At least in ecclesiological analysis, the local parish remained little more than an administrative sub-unit.

Catholic ecclesiological reflections in the post-Tridentine era continued to center themselves on questions of authority in the larger church, though not always the universal Church. The rise of European nationalism in the early modern era refocused attention on the national churches and the authority of the nation-state within them, and power struggles between monarch and pope played out in the establishment of the Spanish (and Portuguese) *patronato* and the Church of England. Later tensions between national churches and the papal authority were manifested in the controversies over Gallicanism and ultramontanism, and in a more restrained way with the Americanist controversy. Throughout, there was little focus on local faith communities of any sort. Finally, the reaction to modernity through “the long nineteenth century” theologically emphasized the Church as a hierarchical *societas perfecta*.<sup>8</sup> Modern bureaucratic techniques and communications technology allowed for ever greater papal centralization. By the time the 1917 Code of Canon Law was promulgated, the local faith community was nearly forgotten. The parish was described as a territorial section of the diocese and a “benefice,” a legitimate source of income for the pastor or parish priest operating under the authority of the pope and the bishops (cc. 451, 1409–1488).<sup>9</sup>

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5. Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 231–32.

6. Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 206; David Chidestar, *Christianity: A Global History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 192–94.

7. Stanley R. Maveety, “Doctrine in Tyndale’s New Testament: Translation as a Tendentious Art,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 6 (1966): 151–58 at 151, <https://doi.org/10.2307/449592>.

8. On the “long nineteenth century,” see John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008), 53–92.

9. Joseph A. Janicki, “Commentary on Canons 515–572,” in *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, ed. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel (New York: Paulist, 1985), 414–49 at 415.

Despite this resistance to considering the parish ecclesologically, the parish had not fully disappeared from theological view. In the early twentieth century, many theologians did subscribe to the view of it as a geographical subdivision with no particular ecclesial identity.<sup>10</sup> Yet in the 1930s, Maurice Schurr described the parish as “a representation and realization of the Church of God, and as such an *ecclesiola in Ecclesia*, a daughter church of the Mother Church, a visible and tangible expression of the fullness of Christ in our midst and for our benefit.”<sup>11</sup> Closer to the Second Vatican Council, Karl Rahner forcefully argued for the theological significance of the parish.<sup>12</sup> Encumbered by the official *societas perfecta* model of church, Rahner nevertheless described the parish as “the primary realization of the Church as event,” especially concretized in its celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>13</sup> Given the reality of the Church as a visible society, Rahner argued, the church, even constituted as a society for all the ages, becomes more fully itself when it is concretized as an incarnational event in particular communities in particular times and places.

The Second Vatican Council famously shifted attention to the “particular churches” and to the bishop in their midst. *Ressourcement* theology brought back the patristic idea of the bishops as instruments of apostolicity and symbols of the Church’s communion.<sup>14</sup> This shift from the universal to the local church (and its symbol of unity, the bishop) also overlooked the parish theologically, though the parish receives oblique mention in *Lumen Gentium*’s exploration of the episcopacy, especially as it centers on the celebration of the Eucharist, from which community life flows:

This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament. For these are in fact, in their own localities, the new people called by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit and as the result of full conviction (cf. 1 Thess. 1:5). In them the faithful are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated “so that, by means of the flesh and blood of the Lord the whole brotherhood of the Body may be welded together.” In each altar community, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, a manifest symbol is to be seen of that charity and “unity of the mystical body, without which there can be no salvation.” In these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora, Christ is present through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted. (*LG* 26)

The passage introduces a certain ecclesiological ambiguity. It appears to legitimize local groups of the faithful—parishes and their kin—on *ressourcement* grounds, that

10. Robert E. Moran, “Theology of Parish,” *Worship* 38 (June–July 1964): 421–426.

11. Maurice Schurr, “From Other Lands: The Parish as a Supernatural Reality (II),” *Orate Fratres* 12 (1938): 311–317 at 316.

12. See Thomas O’Meara, “Karl Rahner on Priest, Parish, and Deacon,” *Worship* 40 (1966): 103–10 at 106–8; and Robert E. Moran, “Theology of Parish,” 421–426.

13. Karl Rahner, “Theology of the Parish,” 30.

14. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 20–28, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (hereafter cited as *LG*).

is, because such communities, under the authority of bishops, were called churches in the New Testament and patristic eras. The Council fathers clearly see the resemblance between these churches and our parishes. Yet also on *ressourcement* grounds, Vatican II focuses the lion's share of ecclesiological attention on the episcopacy as the fullness of the ordained priesthood, the bishop as successor to the apostles, and the bishops' singular governance over the particular churches entrusted to them (*LG* 18–27). The absence of the bishop at the parish would seem to limit the ecclesiological significance of the parish. Indeed, in response to Vatican II, the revised 1983 Code of Canon Law does not use the word *ecclesia* to describe the parish even in some limited sense.

At the same time, Church teaching during and since the Council has never argued that the parish is simply a geographical subdivision or the benefice of a pastor. During the Council, in a 1963 address to the Roman clergy, Paul VI argued that the parish was given a particular mission “to create the basic community of the Christian people [and] to initiate and gather the people in the regular expression of liturgical life.”<sup>15</sup> The Code of Canon Law calls it “a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor (*parochus*) as its proper pastor (*pastor*) under the authority of the diocesan bishop” (c. 515 §1). In *Christifidelis Laici*, John Paul II, quoting both *Lumen Gentium* and the 1983 Code, argued, “The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather the family of God . . . the community of the faithful.”<sup>16</sup> Here and in *Ecclesia in America*, this pope rooted the ecclesiological significance of the parish in its role as a eucharistic community. Perhaps channeling Rahner, he wrote in that latter apostolic exhortation, “The parish is a privileged place where the faithful concretely experience the Church.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite this powerful new affirmation of the ecclesiological significance of both the local church and the parish, influential voices in the postconciliar Church returned the conversation squarely to the universal Church, accompanied by renewed efforts at institutional centralization. Thus, by 1992, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) could claim of the universal Church, “It is not the result of the communion of the Churches, but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular Church.”<sup>18</sup> Still, individual bishops and

15. Paul VI, Address to the clergy of the city of Rome (Rome, June 24, 1963), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/speeches/1963/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_spe\\_19630624\\_clergy-rome.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/speeches/1963/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19630624_clergy-rome.html) (author's translation from the Spanish).

16. John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici* (December 30, 1988), 26, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html) (hereafter cited in text as *CL*).

17. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (January 22, 1999), 41, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_22011999\\_ecclesia-in-america.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html) (hereafter cited in text as *EA*).

18. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion” (May 28, 1992), 9, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_28051992\\_communionis-notio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html).

even regional and national bishops' conferences contested this singular focus on the universal Church, a vivid example being episcopal resentment and resistance over the Vatican management of the 1992 Fourth Conference of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM) at Santo Domingo. Perhaps even more telling, the CDF's "ontological primacy" was contested within the Vatican in an unusually public discussion between Cardinal Ratzinger (later Benedict XVI) of the CDF and Cardinal Walter Kasper of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. More recently, Pope Francis has insisted on the importance of regional and national bishops' conferences, peppering his apostolic exhortations *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris Laetitia* and his encyclical *Laudato Si'* with references to the teaching of various bishops' conferences.

Yet, in the United States, even bishops and theologians who emphasize the importance of the dioceses or local churches still have shown strong resistance to ceding any ecclesial significance to parishes.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this is not surprising in the United States given the strong presence of congregational polity in our Protestant history. Indeed, sociologists of religion argue that Catholic parishes in the United States tend toward the organizational form of the congregation—what they refer to as *de facto* congregationalism. Thus, many parishes emphasize the voluntary nature of membership and not just traditional Catholic notions of sacramental and geographical belonging. For example, American Catholic parishes have the unique practice of "parish registration," which implies an intentional (and often financial) commitment to a particular parish. Studies show that many Catholics (including the author) have engaged in "parish shopping" and proudly describe the uniqueness of their parish over and against others.<sup>20</sup> Some bishops have worried that this tendency toward congregationalism weakens the ecclesiological significance and authority of the bishop. In a sense, they are concerned about the reduction of the Church to the experience at the local parish. In response, they emphasize the patristic idea of the Church as communion and the bishop as the local symbol of that communion.<sup>21</sup>

19. See, for example, Francis George, "The Parish in the Mission of the Church," in *What Is a Parish? Canonical, Pastoral, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Thomas Baima (Chicago: Liturgy Training, 2011), 18–38 at 34; and Robert Christian, "Bonds of Communion among Parishes and among Pastors," in Baima, *What Is a Parish?* 130–53 at 131–35.

20. On *de facto* congregationalism, see R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2005), 145–208; and Wendy Cadge, "De Facto Congregationalism and the Religious Organizations of Post-1965 Immigrants to the United States: A Revised Approach," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76 (2008): 344–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfn034>. For an assessment of *de facto* congregationalism among Catholics, see Brett C. Hoover, *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism* (New York: NYU, 2014), 150–61.

21. George, "The Parish in the Mission of the Church," 18–21. See also M. Francis Mannion, *Masterworks of God: Essays in Liturgical Theory and Practice* (Chicago: Liturgical Training, 2004), 66–74. A similar Orthodox perspective can be found in Nicholas Ferencz, *American Orthodoxy and Parish Congregationalism*, Gorgias Studies in Religion 18 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006).

Communion ecclesiology is indeed a powerful lens for understanding both the church and the parish within it, but an even more interesting aspect of this argument against congregationalism is its admission that the contemporary context of parish life matters in our formulation of an appropriate theology of parish. Thus, before moving forward in a consideration of a theology of the parish rooted in communion ecclesiology, it makes sense to take a closer look at contemporary parish life, focusing particular attention on contextual factors that emerge from quantitative and qualitative study of the parish today. I focus my attention here on the parish in the United States, as that is my own context, but I will also make some reference to study of the parish around the globe.

## Portraits of the Parish in Contemporary Social Science

The *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae 2012* released by the Vatican in 2014 identifies 221,740 canonical parishes in the world. Most (55 percent) of those parishes still lie in Europe, where less than a quarter of the world's Catholics now live, even as European parishes continue to close and merge for lack of congregants or priests. In Africa and Asia, where mass attendance is generally high, the number of parishes has doubled, though in Africa the number of Catholics per parish has also skyrocketed to 13,050, suggesting the immense size of many parishes. The number of priests has also grown quickly in Africa and Asia, and only 5.9 percent of African and 8.9 percent of Asian parishes now go without a resident priest. Just over a quarter of the world's parishes are in the Americas, yet almost half of the world's Catholics live there. The number of priestless parishes remains double or more than that of Africa and Asia, though in Latin America many local faith communities have long existed without the canonical designation of *parish*, suggesting that many more local faith communities lack priests than statistics indicate. All of this verifies the much-documented shift of Christianity from Europe to the global South. It also demonstrates that the institutional infrastructure of Catholic parish life struggles to keep pace with the shift in the Catholic population—a situation exacerbated by global income inequality.<sup>22</sup>

Parish life in the United States does not fit tidily into the clear trajectory of either a Europe or an Africa. Because so many immigrants have come from largely Catholic countries like Mexico and the Philippines, the US Catholic population has continued to grow, even as the number of parishes has shrunk rapidly in the last decade, largely because of parish suppressions and merges in the Northeast and Midwest. A fifth of parishes in the United States have no resident pastor, most of them attended to by a priest pastor who lives at another parish. 11 percent are led by a deacon or lay person under canon 517§2.<sup>23</sup> Catholic parishes also typically have many more people (in

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22. Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Global Catholicism: Trends and Forecasts* (Washington, DC: CARA, 2015), 1–40, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/staff/webpages/global%20catholicism%20release.pdf>.

23. Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “Frequently Requested Church Statistics,” <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>. For more on this leadership structure, see Kathy Hendricks, *Parish Life Coordinators: Profile of an Emerging Ministry* (Chicago: Loyola, 2009).

sheer numbers) attending worship than faith communities of other religions and denominations in the United States. The US Congregational Life Study calculated average weekly attendance at Catholic parishes as more than six times that of Protestant churches.<sup>24</sup> The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA) found 28 percent of parishes have five or more masses, and less than 10 percent of parishes have only one Sunday mass.<sup>25</sup>

Greater parish size, in the United States or elsewhere, is in part the product of diversity in the degree of parish involvement. A Catholic parish on any given Sunday will host not only those highly involved in parish life but also weekly mass-goers, periodic or occasional mass-goers, and one-time visitors. Back in 1954, the Jesuit sociologist Joseph Fichter broke a New Orleans parish he studied into categories based on the frequency of church attendance and involvement, describing a combination of dormant, modal, marginal, and nuclear Catholics. Mark Gray of CARA has continued to find a broad gap between “core” and “periphery” Catholics in parish life.<sup>26</sup> The Spanish pastoral theologian Casiano Floristán has pointed out how this core-periphery dynamic structures the scope of pastoral ministry in Catholic parishes, multiplying the number of liturgical rites and pastoral services required, often either at certain times of the year or in response to pivotal life events—illness, death, birth, marriage.<sup>27</sup> Other research indicates that parishes can exhibit considerable tensions over these gaps between different levels of participation; “pew-warmers” are disparaged by those with a high commitment to the parish.<sup>28</sup>

Even for Catholics who do participate on a regular basis and make a parish their “spiritual home” (to use a distinctly American phrase), most of their face-to-face contact still occurs within a small slice of the parish, that is, with other Catholics who participate in the same groups and ministries within the parish. The majority of US parishes have at least the following groups and ministries: sacramental

24. Susan Barnett, “Characteristics of U.S. Congregations by Faith Group, Part I (2008/2009),” *US Congregational Life Survey*, <http://www.uscongregations.org/blog/2014/02/17/characteristics-of-u-s-congregations-by-faith-group-part-1-20082009/>.

25. Mark M. Gray, Mary L. Gautier, and Melissa A. Cidade, *The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes* (Washington, DC: Emerging Models of Parish Leadership Project, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, 2011), 27, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/caraservices/parishes%20phase%20one.pdf>.

26. Joseph Fichter, *Dynamics of an Urban Parish*, vol. 1 of *The Southern Parish* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951); and Mark Gray, “Stable Transformation: Catholic Parishioners in the United States” (paper presented at Sociology of the Parish Conference, Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, June 2015).

27. Casiano Floristán, *Teología práctica: Teoría y praxis de la acción pastoral*, 5th ed. (Salamanca: Sigueme, 2009), 580.

28. Brett C. Hoover, “Lost and Found: Immigrant Conversion Stories, the New Evangelization, and Parish Life,” *New Theology Review* 27 (2014): 33–39 at 38, [http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/169/](http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/169/).



preparation groups for children and teenagers, outreach to the homebound, youth ministry, senior ministry, social service ministries, and ministry to the bereaved. The recent National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry indicates that a majority of parishes with Latinos host at least one of the “apostolic movements”—large parachurch groups that emphasize spiritual practices and lay leadership. Examples include the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), the Neo-Catechumenal Way, Jovenes para Cristo, and many others.<sup>29</sup> Finally, in the United States, 56 percent of parishes report a relationship to a Catholic school, with a quarter of parishes having their own parish school, often gathering a community of parents and families around it.<sup>30</sup>

For a large number of Catholic parishes in the United States and other immigrant societies, internal diversity does not just concern groups and ministries but also distinct ethnic, cultural, or racial groups. *Shared parishes* host multiple, distinct groups usually rooted in a particular culture, ethnicity, or language group.<sup>31</sup> As the current wave of immigration has changed the demographic profile of Catholicism in the United States—toward a younger and more Hispanic Church with a still-small but rapidly growing Asian and Pacific Islander population—shared parishes have proliferated as one way of addressing the needs of immigrants and their families. Thus, CARA has found that 29 percent of all parishes have mass at least once a month in a language other than English, 81 percent of those in Spanish.<sup>32</sup> Other research has shown that the percentage of parishes with mass in more than one language varies a great deal regionally, but in immigrant-rich dioceses it routinely includes half to three-quarters of local parishes.<sup>33</sup> Yet research suggests that, despite all this, Roman Catholic responses to demographic transformations in the United States remain inadequate; nationally, a relatively small number of parishes are doing the “multicultural heavy lifting,” especially in terms of Hispanic ministry.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, ethnic and racial diversity in parish life often leads to tensions within parishes, usually over the distribution of

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29. Hosffman Ospino, *Hispanic Ministry in Catholic Parishes: A Summary Report of Findings from the National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry* (Boston: Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, 2014), 17.

30. Gray, Gautier, and Cidade, “The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes,” 2–3. See also Brett C. Hoover, “Negotiating the Parish: Power Dynamics in the Multiple Communities of a Catholic Parish” (paper presented at Sociology of the Parish Conference, Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, June 2015).

31. Hoover, *The Shared Parish*, 2.

32. Gray, Gautier, and Cidade, “The Changing Face,” 2.

33. In web and phone surveys undertaken between 2014 and 2015, I found that 76 percent of the parishes in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles have mass in more than one language, 70 percent in the Brooklyn Diocese (New York), 54 percent in Phoenix, 51 percent in the Chicago Archdiocese, 41 percent in Charleston, South Carolina, 17 percent in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and 12 percent in the Archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska.

34. Hosffman Ospino and Brett C. Hoover, “Parish Life and Hispanic Ministry,” in *Hispanic Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Urgent Issues* (Miami: Convivium, 2016), 31–46 at 43.

resources, space, and the attention of the leadership, and the racialized power dynamics of the larger society also shape the internal power dynamics of parishes.

The size and internal diversity of Catholic parishes also show the limits of viewing US parishes as *congregations*. Although Catholic parishioners often do see their participation as a kind of “membership” in a voluntary community, that community really functions more like a geographically situated network of voluntary communities. While Catholic parishioners frequently attribute considerable authority to lay leaders within their parishes, parishes retain a clear centralized authority structure focused firmly on the clergy—the pastor’s “canonical monopoly.”<sup>35</sup> Parish life is decidedly not congregational in another sense—parishes must offer sacramental services to all Catholics in the geographical area.<sup>36</sup> The scope of this implicit mission both cements ties to a particular place and contributes significantly to the larger size and internal complexity of Catholic parishes.

Outside of the United States, parish size and internal diversity also have a great impact. Across the globe, rapid urbanization has changed the face of Christianity, including Catholicism. In Latin America, for example, where nearly 40 percent of the world’s Catholics live, some urban parishes provide services to 50,000 Catholics.<sup>37</sup> A single parish in Dubai serves up to 80,000 people in fourteen different languages.<sup>38</sup> Another in metro Manila in the Philippines allegedly serves as many as a half million.<sup>39</sup> The resulting parish structure looks quite different from US parishes: “Parish churches operate with masses at every hour on the hour, many with multiple chapels spread across the city or countryside. Priests move exhaustedly from one sacrament and celebration to another (one Mexican priest in the United States compared parishes to factories).”<sup>40</sup> In such an environment, especially given the historically rural isolation of much of Latin America, practice and teaching of the faith occur more at home

35. James D. Davidson and Suzanne Fournier, “Recent Research on Catholic Parishes: A Research Note,” *Review of Religious Research* 48 (2006): 72–81 at 76–77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20058119>. Regarding the “canonical monopoly,” see Hoover, *The Shared Parish*, 157.

36. David R. Maines and Michael J. McCallion, “Research Note: Evidence of and Speculations on Catholic *De Facto* Congregationalism,” *Review of Religious Research* 46 (2004): 92–101, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3512256>; Warner, “Work in Progress,” 1067; Jay Dolan, “Patterns of Leadership in the Congregation,” in *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, vol. 2 of *American Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 225–256; and Hoover, *The Shared Parish*, 150–61.

37. Bryan T. Froehle, “Religious Competition, Community Building, and Democracy in Latin America: Grassroots Religion in Venezuela,” *Sociology of Religion* 55 (1994): 145–62 at 150, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711854>.

38. See “History,” *St. Mary’s Catholic Church, Dubai, U.A.E.*, <http://saintmarysdubai.org/history>.

39. Katharine L. Wiegale, *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2005), 120.

40. Hoover, *The Shared Parish*, 165.

or in the neighborhood than through parish activities. Popular religion and intergenerational relationships play a large role in that kind of home Catholicism, though migration to cities or to the north can prove disruptive to that process. Also in huge parishes, basic ecclesial communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base* or CEBs) of a few dozen people or the cell groups of large apostolic movements like the Charismatic Renewal across Latin America or El Shaddai in the Philippines often provide a more immediate sense of faith community. Parishes end up functioning less like gathered communities and more like sites to receive the sacraments (including Sunday Eucharist) and other blessings and ceremonies.<sup>41</sup> CEBs and apostolic movement communities function more like congregations.

To sum up, then, parishes today both in the United States and across the world tend to be large and internally diverse. We cannot conceive of most of them as face-to-face communities, despite the canonical definition of them as stable communities of the faithful; instead, parishes truly function as large organizations where multiple face-to-face communities co-exist and sometimes collide. The resulting encounters and collisions make up a great deal of parish life, and they demonstrate tensions and power dynamics both proper to the parish and those bestowed by the larger social fabric. In the United States, there remains an innate tension in parish life between the legal structures and cultural ideals that favor congregationalism and a more traditionally Catholic view of parish as a stable and geographically rooted site for the experience of the sacraments. In other parts of the world, the tension may actually erupt between other kinds of “congregations” (base communities or apostolic movements) and the clerical authority structure and sacramental practices inherent in the parish. In any case, any theological consideration of the parish must speak to this reality of parish life as a place of intersecting relationalities—an ecclesial place where different groups and communities exist in relationship to one another, to the pastor, and to the bishop and the larger society.

## Communion Ecclesiology

In recent decades, both prelates and theologians have often looked to communion ecclesiology to make sense of a Church of communities and institutions embedded in these sorts of webs of ecclesial relationships. This includes those who have attempted to understand the parish through the lens of communion.<sup>42</sup> Dennis Doyle characterizes

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41. James Empeur and Eduardo Fernández, *La Vida Sacra: Contemporary Hispanic Sacramental Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 24–40; Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 32–62, 111–55.

42. See Russel Murray, “In the Neighborhoods of Humanity: An Ecclesiology of the Parish for a Time of Closings and Mergers,” *New Theology Review* 22 (2009): 5–14, <http://newtheologyreview.org/index.php/ntr/article/view/110/168>; EA 41; and Committee for Cultural Diversity in the Church of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Best Practices in Shared Parishes: So That They May All Be One* (2014).

communion ecclesiology as an ecclesiological trajectory with four elements that persist across ideological and even ecumenical differences. First, it finds its roots in a patristic vision of Church that predates Orthodox–Catholic–Protestant divisions. Second, in contrast to the juridical vision of the Church of nineteenth century Catholicism, communion ecclesiology focuses attention on the spiritual bonds between Christians and their God and between distinct Christian communities (and their bishops) across time and space, often referred to as the “vertical” and “horizontal” dimensions of communion. Third, Doyle sees the Eucharist as the central visible symbol of those vertical and horizontal bonds, although I would argue that baptism also plays an important role.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the ecclesial dynamic (tension, even) between unity and diversity, between universal and local, is not a problem for communion but rather a constitutive element of communion.<sup>44</sup>

According to Doyle, for Roman Catholics the modern ecclesiological trajectory of communion stretches back to the organic ecclesiology of Johann Adam Möhler in the early nineteenth century, influenced by German Romanticism.<sup>45</sup> Edward Hahnenberg shows how Möhler’s achievement enabled Romano Guardini and Sebastian Tromp to describe the Church as Christ’s mystical body, a divine mystery. The encyclical of Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, which depended heavily on Tromp, remains the high-water mark of the Mystical Body, with its marriage of the invisible bonds of the Body with the visible structures of the Church as a more-or-less monarchical *societas*.<sup>46</sup> Also formative for communion ecclesiology was a notion of communion formulated in the Orthodox theological revival that began with Alexei Khomiakov in the nineteenth century. Also a partial reaction to German Romanticism, this movement influenced the French *nouvelle théologie*, whose theologians went on to retrieve the notion of communion (or *koinōnia*) from their studies of the New Testament canon and their retrieval of patristic theology, particularly its ecclesiological reflection on the unity of the Church in relationship to its geographical dispersion, episcopal oversight, and trinitarian identity.<sup>47</sup> Although the term *koinōnia* only intermittently appeared in *Lumen Gentium* at Vatican II—initially overshadowed by the image of the People of God—postconciliar controversies brought communion to the fore as an interpretive lens. Like the Mystical Body, it made space for the authority of the papacy and episcopacy even as it disavowed the pure juridicism of the perfect society. By 1985, the Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops had famously noted, regarding the Second Vatican Council, “The

43. Cf. Susan K. Wood, “Presbyteral Identity within Parish Identity,” in *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood*, ed. Susan K. Wood (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2003), 175–94 at 182–86.

44. Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 13.

45. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 23–37.

46. Edward Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historic Parallels,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 3–30 at 5–10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002114000507000101>.

47. Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body,” 15–17.

ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents."<sup>48</sup>

Of course, communion ecclesiology itself—as well as its use as a hermeneutical lens for the Second Vatican Council—has had its critics. Theologians like Nicholas M. Healy see communion as too diffuse and indeterminate to function helpfully as an ecclesial image: “It would seem that there are few concrete ecclesiological implications of the ‘communion’ concept beyond ruling out ecclesial structures and practices that foster blatant individualism.”<sup>49</sup> In his defense of the ecclesial image of the People of God in *Lumen Gentium*, the Belgian-Brazilian liberation theologian José Comblin views communion as a near-Platonic ideal that extracts the Church from human history, so that communion becomes more a state to be guarded by the hierarchy than a process unfolding in history.<sup>50</sup> The Australian Neil Ormerod also worries about an idealized communion ecclesiology suffering from “the lack of any real contact with the actual history of the Church.”<sup>51</sup> In response, Dennis Doyle sees the very indeterminacy of communion as an ideal as a strength—a non-juridical view of the Church that can accommodate multiple perspectives, including the different sides in postconciliar theological polarizations.<sup>52</sup> Doyle and others see the dynamic of unity and diversity in communion ecclesiology as particularly resonant in an era that struggles with difference.

Not everyone believes that the problem is communion ecclesiology itself, but rather a particular strain of it. Bradford Hinze weighs in, “I contend, and I am not alone in so doing, that communion ecclesiology as such is not the source of the problem and consternation since the 1980s” but rather “an official papal and curial expression of communion ecclesiology.”<sup>53</sup> This expression emerged with the revision of the Code of Canon Law (1983) and the 1985 Synod of Bishops, and in Hinze's view it eclipsed a Vatican II people of God ecclesiology that had encouraged a role for lay people, inspired by the Spirit, in the prophetic mission of the Church.<sup>54</sup> Both Roberto Goizueta and Natalie Imperatori-Lee agree that communion per se is not the problem, but they see a need for a more historically grounded view of communion, which they both argue can be recovered through theological traditions traditionally pushed to the periphery, such as US Hispanic theology. Both suggest that these alternative

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48. “Text of Final Report Adopted by Synod of Bishops in Rome,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/08/world/text-of-final-report-adopted-by-synod-of-bishops-in-rome.html>.

49. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and Christian Life: A Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (New York: Cambridge University, 2000), 45.

50. José Comblin, *People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 52–62.

51. Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 28.

52. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 11–22.

53. Bradford Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience: Ecclesiology for a Dialogical Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 37.

54. Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience*, 37–51.

perspectives have the potential for disrupting tidy, uniform ecclesial narratives like the official version of communion, instead pushing the Church to greater self-examination and conversion from its own historical participation in social evils.<sup>55</sup> Like Hinze, the two also emphasize the prophetic role of the Church, and along with Comblin, invite us to see the people of God as a pilgrim Church in need of conversion and reform, an *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

In a complementary way, Neil Ormerod raises concerns about the lack of reflection on mission in communion ecclesiology. “One of the great discoveries of contemporary theology,” he writes, “is the reappropriation of the biblical symbol of the kingdom.”<sup>56</sup> For Ormerod, there can be no normative account of the Church without one eye on its mission, specifically its responsibility to the reign of God as proclaimed by its founder.<sup>57</sup> On the one hand, this draws attention to the eschatological nature of communion as a process in history. Thus, while a certain ecclesiological documentary tradition—beginning with *Lumen Gentium*—has emphasized the regrettably “imperfect communion” between Christian churches, in truth all ecclesial communion remains imperfect and incomplete. Knit to Christ, we have been ushered by the Spirit into trinitarian life, but full union with God eludes us. Baptism has formed us as brothers and sisters and as a sacrament of unity in the world (*LG* 1), but our bonds with one another remain partial and constrained, wounded in their ability to serve as sign and instrument of universal solidarity. We cannot conceive of communion simply as a static bond established by baptism, celebrated in the Eucharist, and symbolized in and guaranteed by the bishops and pope entrusted with the apostolic witness. Such a conception keeps our ecclesial focus inappropriately *ad intra*. Seen in the light of the proclamation of God’s reign, communion must instead function as a relational reality embedded in the Church but stretching toward all creation. Communion must also serve as a calling to an eschatological unity far more profound than anything we can currently imagine.

As a people and a world wounded by sin, we strain to serve this call to be Church. We struggle not only with personal sin but also with our participation in social and structural sin so severe and complex that poor and marginalized human beings and even the planet itself suffer almost intractably for it. In such a circumstance, all members of the Church must live in public solidarity with those who suffer—the crucified people of God in whom the Church encounters its Lord, by whom we are all called to conversion and salvation. Goizueta, following Ellacuría and Sobrino, insists that this call must be concrete and historical.<sup>58</sup> Or, as Jamie Phelps puts it,

55. Natalie Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts: Latino/a Theology and the Church in the Third Millennium,” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2015), 45–63; and Roberto S. Goizueta, “Corpus Verum: Toward a Borderland Ecclesiology,” in *Building Bridges, Doing Justice: Constructing a Latino/a Ecumenical Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 143–66 at 144–52.

56. Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 7.

57. Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 7 and 29.

58. Goizueta, “Corpus Verum,” 147–52.

Commitment to communion is integrally connected to a commitment to Black and other forms of liberation. A social historical appropriation of communion ecclesiology in the heart of the Americas in general and the US in particular will require a radical conversion by which we acknowledge the sinful nature of the systems of oppression within our ecclesial institutions and society which divide the human community.<sup>59</sup>

Radical conversion will require that all admit and renounce their complicity in such systems, seek forgiveness from the crucified people, and “work together toward human solidarity rooted in our spiritual communion.”<sup>60</sup>

## Communion in the Parish

A parish could be seen, then, as a crucial site where this struggle for communion unfolds in a concrete history—or rather, interlocking concrete histories. Parishes become places where the Spirit gifts intersecting communities with bonds that tie them to God and to one another, both within and between the distinct communities within the parish. Thinking of the parish in this way could unlock a rich stable of ecclesiological resources for imagining and living parish life, even more so where the parish exists as nexus of diversity, a place where Christians struggle over time with the cultural, ethnic, racial, and ideological diversity ever more characteristic of late modern life.<sup>61</sup> Our ability to unlock these resources, however, depends on how well *koinōnia* works as a theological lens for the parish. Vatican II explicitly notes how real ecclesial bonds of unity existed in the local faith communities the New Testament calls churches. Yet use of the specific word *koinōnia* in the New Testament remains varied and idiosyncratic. In the patristic era, *koinōnia* generally referred to the connections between geographically dispersed local faith communities—not unlike our parishes—and their overseers (*episkopoi*). In those early centuries, the ties of communion between these local faith communities were demonstrated through exchanged letters between the bishops, regional synods, diptychs naming brother bishops, and the eucharistic *fermentum* transported from community to community.<sup>62</sup>

With some reference to this historical trend, one contemporary theological argument against the ecclesial importance of the parish asserts that only the dioceses—the local churches—can properly be described as a communion of believers; the parish only participates in that communion of the local church. Francis George, the influential Archbishop of Chicago from 1997 to 2014, summarizes the argument well: “A communion is a network of relationships that are established through the sharing of gifts ... The network of relationships that establish the church comes to be through the

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59. Jamie Phelps, “Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 672–99 at 695, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390006100404>.

60. Phelps, “Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology,” 695.

61. Hoover, *The Shared Parish*, 1–27. See also Mary Ellen Konieczny, *The Spirit's Tether: Family, Work, and Religion among American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University, 2013).

62. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*, 130.

sharing of the gifts that Jesus Christ wants his people to have and enjoy.” Cardinal George further elaborates, “The Church exists in her fullness when all those gifts are shared.”<sup>63</sup> Because the parish lacks the crucial gift of the episcopacy, which represents the local church’s unified faith in the tradition of the apostles in communion with the Bishop of Rome, “a parish is not fully a Church.”<sup>64</sup> George seems to be drawing upon an implicit parallel to the Vatican’s hesitancy to designate as “churches” those Christian traditions who lack the episcopacy,<sup>65</sup> even though Catholic parishes lack the episcopacy only in the sense that the bishop is not physically in residence and does not lead the community from day to day.

Other Catholic theologians take issue with this emphasis on the episcopacy as the crucial gift that makes an ecclesial body a communion or church. This is the heart of José Comblin’s argument against communion ecclesiology in his book *People of God*—that it sacrifices any notion of the parish as a concrete pilgrim people in favor of authority-centered structures of communion. Jesuit William Clark, on the other hand, accepts the premises of communion ecclesiology but in a certain sense reverses the momentum of George’s argument about the necessity of the gift of the episcopacy. While Clark does not deny the necessity of the episcopacy in the Church, he argues that there can be no real ecclesial life or church authority without concrete local faith communities:

A socializing process is necessary at the very local level if the larger structures of the church are not to become empty shells. The local community, therefore, functions as a practical school of authority for the church as a whole. The local community, the “community in place,” is the only concrete church there is.<sup>66</sup>

Clark acknowledges his debt to Rahner here and his notion of the parish as the concretization of the Church as paschal event. But Clark goes further. Because the parish is the place where at least a great number of Christian people live in concrete relationships established by baptism and celebrated in the Eucharist, he argues that the local faith community has an ecclesial authority properly its own. “Our intimate relationships, and the community that both fosters and arises from them, are not, then, merely resources for the church’s later use. Rather they are the actual medium within which the Spirit of God continually creates and shapes the church.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, these local concrete relationships are not just resources for the Church—they are the Church.

63. Francis George, “The Parish in the Mission of the Church,” 20.

64. *Ibid.*, 22.

65. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (August 6, 2000), 17, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

66. William Clark, *A Voice of Their Own: The Authority of the Local Parish* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2005), 129.

67. Clark, *A Voice of Their Own*, 85.



Yet as Clark intimates, the full ecclesial life and true authority embedded in the local faith community do not mean that other forms of authority are secondary or unnecessary. He is not advocating congregationalism; nor am I. A parish that attempts to sever its ties to the bishop and the universal Church has lost something vital; it has disrupted ecclesial bonds of communion.<sup>68</sup> In short, under the aegis of an expansive relational understanding of the church as communion, seemingly contradictory notions about the locus of authority in the church—parish or diocese, people or clergy—can be reconciled. When the church is a communion, the parish and diocese do not constitute separate but interrelated entities. The parish remains a part of the diocese as local church, but the diocese also depends upon the parish and other local communities of the faithful to concretize it in different places, lest the diocese become an administrative structure rather than the Church of the bishop. Vatican II's teaching on the episcopacy and ordained priesthood echoes this relationality. Ordained priests "constitute one priesthood with their bishop although bound by a diversity of duties. Associated with their bishop in a spirit of trust and generosity, they make him present in a certain sense in the individual local congregations" (*LG* 28). One might add that the concrete discipleship of the baptized faithful becomes present to the bishop through the parish priest—or through members of the lay faithful the bishop has commissioned or authorized as leaders in their local communities of faith.

*Lumen Gentium*, from the very beginning, describes the Church as "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (*LG* 1). Communion within the parish does not, strictly speaking, exist for the parish itself but to empower the baptismal priesthood of those who gather there for mission, both within and especially beyond the parish. John Paul II writes, "Bearing fruit is an essential demand of life in Christ and life in the Church. The person who does not bear fruit does not remain in communion: 'Each branch of mine that bears no fruit, he (my Father) takes away' (Jn 15:2)" (*CL* 32). The parish itself is not the end of communion but a vehicle for it. Pope Francis argues that the very identity of the parish as an ecclesial structure "presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few."<sup>69</sup> The American Franciscan theologian Russel Murray calls the parish "the church alive in every corner of the world; the church effectively present in the neighborhoods of humanity."<sup>70</sup> Thus, the Spirit bestows charisms within the parish so that the parish—that is, the body of the faithful gathered there—might become a local sacrament of the unity of humankind and an instrument of God's Reign. Even the very local

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68. I choose the word *attempts* here intentionally; the onset of a family feud does not always portend the total destruction of family ties. Ecumenical statements in the wake of Vatican II emphasize this point. So does the Catholic Church's rare use of excommunication.

69. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 28, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (hereafter cited as *EG*).

70. Russel Murray, "In the Neighborhoods of Humanity," 9.

manifestation of this mission has an eschatological trajectory to it, already present, never finished. Thus, in the particular time and place that constitutes the life of a parish, communion arrives as a gift unleashed in baptism and celebrated in the Eucharist, but that gift also unfolds as a process and struggle in history. The way that process unfolds in history for a specific parish might be regarded as a history of communion for the people and communities of a particular place.

## Parish as Ecclesial Place

A history of communion unfolds in the world, that is, over time and in concrete geographic spaces. Thus, with Karl Rahner and William Clark, we can think of the parish as a place where church—as a paschal event and as communion—is concretized and lived, an *ecclesial place*. It is not the only such place. The story of communion also unfolds in “domestic churches,” at the home or neighborhood altars where people gather for popular religious practices, in the meeting rooms of apostolic movements, at sites where clothes or food are distributed to the poor, or where the baptized engage in activism for justice. In reality, the Spirit may invite people into communion with God and with one another wherever she wills (John 3:8). Nevertheless, the very stability of the parish (c. 515 §1) and its association with those houses of worship where people celebrate the Eucharist together suggest that we must pay it particular attention as an ecclesial place.

In its premodern origins, the territorial parish was less a *place* and more a space—a bounded subsection of Christian territory. In a practical sense, the parish as subsection of territory marked off the extent and limitations of clerical rights and responsibilities, aiming to prevent the kind of competition for power and resources that had resulted in corruption in the medieval era. In a larger more symbolic sense, the parish formed a tiny portion and microcosm of Christendom, a small representation of a grand imaginary of Christian space marked off by its boundaries with spaces either not occupied by human beings or occupied by non-Christians. As medieval Christendom gave way to the modern world, however, the territorial parish incorporated the modern view of space as a grid, a homogeneous expanse. William Cavanaugh links this perspective to the advent of the nation-state, imagined in terms of uniform space marked off by territorial boundaries.<sup>71</sup> But space as a grid also relates to an early modern Newtonian approach to physics, where space functions as an “empty” but concrete entity that contains objects and events but remains unaltered by their presence.<sup>72</sup> In such a universe of space, parishes become, in a sense, interchangeable administrative partitions on a uniform ecclesial grid.

Rahner’s view of the parish as a place disrupts this more abstract early modern vision, emphasizing the parish as the chief location where the paschal event that is

71. William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 101–2.

72. John A. Agnew, “Space and Place,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, ed. John A. Agnew and David N. Livingstone (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 316–31 at 320.

church happens. Parish becomes a place rather than space. Rahner means to draw our attention to church in the concrete, especially as it happens in particular celebrations of the Eucharist at the parish. William Clark takes Rahner's focus on the incarnational concreteness of the parish even further, arguing that the whole Church depends upon the parish as its manifestation in a particular time and space: "The local community, the 'community in place,' is the only concrete church there is."<sup>73</sup> A physical building hosts and represents that concreteness—a temple where people gather for the Eucharist, often paired with a surrounding physical plant where clergy live or other ecclesial activities take place. The sociologist Thomas Gieryn points to material form as a necessary feature of place, whether that form is imposed by construction (as with a building) or marked off in the natural world.<sup>74</sup> In short, the simplest and most literal interpretation of the parish as ecclesial place lies in its being a built-up concrete location—a parcel of land with buildings where people gather for church.

Yet this simple interpretation remains insufficient if it implicitly reinforces that early modern view of space which envisions *place* as an unrepeatable point in an expanse of homogeneous physical space, abstracting place from people and de-emphasizing the importance of context.<sup>75</sup> The physical location of a parish not only establishes it in the concrete, it also *situates* it as a gathering place for specific people from a particular context. Local context inevitably introduces heterogeneity and interpretation. Thomas Gieryn argues that another necessary sociological feature of place is that certain people invest it with meaning and value rooted in their culture and experience. Gieryn elaborates:

Places are doubly constructed: most are built or in some way physically carved out. They are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined. A spot in the universe, with a gathering of physical stuff there, becomes a place only when it ensconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory. In spite of its relatively enduring and imposing materiality, the meaning or value of the same place is labile—flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested.<sup>76</sup>

The parish becomes a real ecclesial place only when actual people socially construct it as such. A particular group of believers interprets and narrates it as that "spot in the universe" where church occurs for them. What it means for church to occur there depends a great deal on local context—on language, culture, history, and social structures like law, economy, and politics.

Within the individualistic cultural context of the United States, for example, parish is frequently constructed by Euro-American Catholics as the voluntary gathering of

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73. William Clark, *A Voice of Their Own*, 129.

74. Thomas F. Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 463–96 at 464–65, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.463>.

75. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 91–92. I have adapted Cavanaugh's use of Certeau's work, Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984).

76. Gieryn, "A Space for Place," 465.

“members”—that is, as a congregation. In Western Europe, with its history of state churches and dramatic postwar secularization, parishes remain both civic and religious space, depositories of local history and memory—something more like a public utility.<sup>77</sup> In places like mainland China or Vietnam, where Catholics live as a persecuted minority, the parish may feel like a haven and a marker of risky religious identity. In places where national cultural identity and Catholic religious identity remain interwoven, such as in Mexico or the Philippines, the parish is less a marker of religious identity and more a place to go for those sacraments and culturally sanctioned ceremonies associated with Catholic practice—mass, baptism, marriage, *quince años*. In each of these cases, communion still unfolds as a relational process at the parish (as part of the universal Church), but culture, history, and local social structures shape *how* communion is experienced. In communist China, the horizontal aspect of communion may feel tight-knit and precarious, whereas in the Philippines it may seem dispersed and coterminous with other bonds like that of family or national identity. As Roberto Goizueta has pointed out, context and culture shape the way people conceptualize the necessity, immediacy, and intimacy of their relationships with God and with other believers.<sup>78</sup>

American theologian Vincent Miller celebrates the way in which parishes are *situated* and therefore shaped by local context as a blessing. He refers to the territorial parish as “a place where the church can hold and frame the local.”<sup>79</sup> In the midst of a postmodern, globalizing world that collapses time and space and decouples persons from their local geography, parish as resolutely tied to the local “territorializes Christianity in the sense of giving it an analytical focus and political traction in the problems of the world. It ties the church to the needs and stories of those who live there.”<sup>80</sup> Yet Miller also acknowledges that being situated in a particular geography isn’t always enough: “People gather in the same place, but their mutual participation in the liturgy does not draw them out of their separate cultural niches.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, parishes often spiritualize gospel demands specifically to avoid wading into the mire of local crises, divisions, and injustice. Citing his own parish, however, Miller maintains that parishes can and do deeply engage their context: “The Eucharistic community can provide a place where the tensions, injustices, and divisions of society can appear and be illuminated by the demands of the gospel.”<sup>82</sup>

These dynamics play out in the way contemporary shared parishes in the United States both reflect the asymmetrical power dynamics between ethnic and racial groups in the larger society and also struggle to confront that tension in their particular context.

77. Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 25–36.

78. Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 47–76.

79. Vincent J. Miller, “Where Is the Church? Globalization and Catholicity,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 412–32 at 429, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390806900210>.

80. Miller, “Where Is the Church?,” 430.

81. Miller, “Where Is the Church?,” 431.

82. Miller, “Where Is the Church?,” 429.

On the one hand, research has shown that Catholics of distinct racial and ethnic backgrounds do explicitly recognize one another as Catholics—that is, as brothers and sisters in the universal Church.<sup>83</sup> Yet as Euro-American communities age and Latino immigrants grow in numbers, many parishes have not found ways to equitably share resources, leadership, and space. Prime mass times and professional staffing go to Euro-American groups, even when other groups vastly outnumber them. Some of this remains rooted in a steadfast resistance to extending empathy to immigrants, especially those who have arrived in search of work but without legal status.<sup>84</sup> In my own research, I have observed the pastoral leadership in many parishes studiously avoiding addressing such tensions and inequalities. Fortunately, some parishes do take Miller’s exhortation to heart, persistently attending to the impact of local tensions within the parish, fighting against favoritism for particular groups, and intervening when parishioners operate in a way that privileges their own group over another.<sup>85</sup>

Addressed or not, these specific challenges illustrate the way in which certain contextual factors—usually, culture, language, and (unequal) social structures—have a dramatic impact on parish life. But context also includes specifically ecclesial elements. As Nicholas M. Healy notes of the Church in general:

Its context consists of all that bears upon or contributes to the shape of Christian witness and discipleship and its ecclesial embodiment. It therefore includes many churchly elements, such as (a far from exclusive list): the church’s history, both local and worldwide; the background beliefs and the economic and social status of its members; recent developments among its leaderships; styles of argumentation in theology (sapiential, scholastic, modern, postmodern); styles of worship, and the like.<sup>86</sup>

The historical focus on the universal Church in Roman Catholicism tends to privilege the global ecclesial context for parish life. Yet, situated as ecclesial places in a particular context, parishes are powerfully shaped by *local* ecclesial leaders, teachings, movements, customs, and practices. Those local realities directly impact parish life but they also act as a lens for the interpretation of teachings and practices that come from Rome.

Over the past thirty years, we have heard Catholics contrast “John Paul II (i.e., traditional) parishes” with “Vatican II (progressive) parishes,” but the comparison largely

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83. Hoover, *The Shared Parish*, 203.

84. 34 percent of white American Catholics argue undocumented immigrants should not be allowed to stay. 55 percent see immigrants as a burden on society rather than a gift. Michael Lipka and Jessica Martinez, “Catholics, Especially Hispanics, Echo Pope’s Call to Embrace Immigrants,” *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center, September 25, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/25/catholics-especially-hispanics-echo-popes-call-to-embrace-immigrants/>.

85. Brett C. Hoover, “No Favoritism: Effective Collaborative Leadership Practices in Multicultural Parishes,” in *Collaborative Parish Leadership: Contexts, Models, Theology* (New York: Lexington, 2017), 103–23.

86. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life*, 39.

makes sense only in the North American ecclesial context. Indeed, the construction of parish life depends more on national and even local ecclesial thinking and practice than Catholics are accustomed to acknowledging. To understand the parish I recently attended, for example, one first has to conjure up its previous pastor, a now-deceased Irish-American priest long active in the reception of Vatican II in Southern California. He employed the parish's influential liturgy and music directors, but their approach also reflects local liturgical developments showcased annually at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress and liturgical music shaped by the complex Catholic encounter with a unique Southern California brand of Evangelical Christianity. On top of all this, a handful of liturgical practices—such as certain hand gestures—clearly trace back to the historical presence of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the area.

Again, in any given parish, the process of communion unfolds as it does across the universal Church, but people experience that process in particular ways molded by an encounter with different local ecclesial leaders, customs, teachings, and practices. At one Southern California parish I studied, the fast-talking pastor worked hard to help parishioners imagine an inclusive multicultural parish whose leadership showed no favoritism. He spoke about such a vision frequently, and he or priest lieutenants intervened whenever parish leaders behaved in ways that seemed to demean another group or demand preferential treatment for their own. At the same parish, popular religious traditions and practice shaped the way people imagined their spiritual bonds with Christ, Mary, and the saints. Before and after mass, Mexican, Central American, and Filipino parishioners visited chapels dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, various Filipino saints, and the Divine Mercy devotion. At the time of my visits, the annual Divine Mercy devotion took place in English and Spanish, and it brought together Latino and Filipino parishioners for a joint experience of prayer and feasting.<sup>87</sup>

## **Structuring the Parish as Ecclesial Place**

Such vignettes from concrete parish life demonstrate the utility of the parish conceived as an ecclesial place, drawing attention to its particularities while not losing sight of its place in the universal Church. Constructing the parish in this way provides more flexibility than other commonly posited ways of thinking about parish life. It steers a middle path between one view that seeks to universalize a juridical approach, turning every parish into an interchangeable liturgical gathering space governed by liturgical rubrics and centralized administrative procedures, and another approach, generally associated with parish life in the United States, that presumes that each parish should function as a voluntary, face-to-face community of disciples.

Regarding the former, parishes imagined as ecclesial places still serve the communities which surround them, both as places where the baptized gather but also as bases for mission beyond the church walls. Yet they need not do so by embodying centralizing trends in parish structure inherited from late medieval reforms and nineteenth century

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87. Cf. Hoover, "No Favoritism," 103–23.

Catholicism. The size and organizational structure of a parish should not depend upon any proposed universal model but on the needs of the local context as interpreted by the bishop and other local pastoral leaders. Pope Francis agrees: “The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community” (EG 28). Bishops should decide what kinds of parishes are needed in various corners of their diocese. They are more likely to attend to local factors like the density of the population, the different ethnic or racial groups and their relationships with one another, the number of available priests, the theological education of the laity, and the need for social services.

On the other hand, the parish as ecclesial place also challenges any movement toward universalizing the US experience and emphasizing the parish as a voluntary, face-to-face community. Envisioned in this way, parishes risk losing touch with the way they are situated in particular locales for the sake of community and mission in that place. When parish amounts only to those gathered by choice, it loses track of its geographically rooted responsibilities. Any approach privileging voluntary membership blurs the power of baptism as a definitive marker of Christian identity and facilitates disdain for those unwilling or unable to make the same intentional commitment. In contrast, Jesus’s behavior in the gospels argues for both broad invitation to Christian community and considerable tolerance of weakness and sin within it (cf. EG 47). In the United States, of course, the great symbol of voluntarism remains the unique and uniform practice of parish registration. Especially when parishes predicate the reception of ecclesial goods (the right to marriage and baptism, religious education, Catholic school attendance) upon parish registration envisioned as “membership” with an implied financial commitment, they contravene canon law regarding the rights of the faithful (cc. 213 and 217). US Catholics best remember that communion is a gift of the Holy Spirit through baptism; it does not depend upon formally declared “membership.”

Nevertheless, the horizontal dimension of communion does require some face-to-face community—as human beings, the faithful require an experience of spiritual bonds as concrete fellowship lest such bonds be seen as abstract and make no real demands upon us. In a village or small town, the whole body of parishioners may form a kind of face-to-face community. So long as the parish accommodates newcomers and irregular churchgoers, and engages in mission beyond the parish, this presents no problem. In urban and suburban locations, however, face-to-face communion likely occurs within a subsection of the parish—an apostolic movement, a base community, a particular ministry or group. This may be for the good. The catholicity of the communion requires that the faithful have an experience of spiritual bonds that exceeds the boundaries of any immediate face-to-face community, especially should that “congregation” prove particularly homogeneous. There is also something deeply human about this, as the writer Marilynne Robinson argues: “Community, at least community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly.”<sup>88</sup>

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88. Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books: Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 2013), 20.

The parish as large, internally diverse nexus of face-to-face communities, the kind of parish increasingly found around the world, seems to provide for face-to-face community as well as an experience of community exceeding the “congregation.” Parishes gather groups of the faithful at different hours on the Lord’s Day—even in different locations or languages—simultaneously communicating that the church belongs both to this particular group and to all those others who gather in the space or under the leadership of the same pastoral leadership as appointed or confirmed by the bishop. They may have many different groups and ministries, each contributing in some way to a larger common good. Leadership may function at multiple levels simultaneously—as the notion of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching recommends—with all the baptized taking some role. This is what Marti Jewell and David Ramey describe as the “total ministering community,” where different levels of leadership operate at different levels contributing to a common mission articulated by the pastor and rooted in the pastoral needs of the context.<sup>89</sup> Such a model corresponds to John Paul II’s articulation of the parish as a “community of communities and movements” (EA 41).

Even so, large parishes may wish to consider how their being a place for communion suggests certain parameters of organizational structure. The greater the size of a parish, the greater the need exists for more complex internal organization and various intermediate levels of leadership. Without this, many large parishes become something more like industrial distributors of the sacraments; in patterns shaped by late modern capitalist consumerism, people come and go all day long but do not bond with anyone in any meaningful way. They may seek little more than a trivialized, individualist experience of worship, and clergy may provide little more, preaching moralistically without challenge or complexity. The formation of disciples may be reduced to familiarity with a list of doctrines. The people of God do not come on a grand eschatological pilgrimage—they pass through and consume sacramental goods. Communion does not unfold but remains stalled and deficient.

At the same time, excessive attention to structure and the modern bureaucracy that often goes with it may distract from the spiritual relationships at the heart of communion. An ecclesial place cannot be reduced to a site for teaching and enforcing juridical formalities.<sup>90</sup> Legalistic attention to liturgical rubrics will overshadow the relational reality of the sacraments. Focus on the preservation of the canonical privileges of bishops and priests can become more important than their pastoral relationship to the rest of the faithful. Too much of parish life, especially but not exclusively in North America, focuses on bureaucratic procedures generated to help organize parish records, sacramental preparation, priests’ schedules, and religious education for children. Many people find that contact with parish offices consists largely in navigating computer phone systems, filling out forms, and observing various protocols to the letter. Human encounters that occur at any ecclesial place should begin with that hospitality which serves as the foundation of all ecclesial relationships, welcoming all

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89. Marti Jewell and David Ramey, *The Changing Face of Church: Emerging Models of Parish Leadership* (Chicago: Loyola, 2010), 113–29.

90. See Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 15.



those who come as the Christ they are. We do not want parishes that possess the sacramental infrastructure of communion but little of the actual experience.

In short, we want parishes to exist as places of concrete encounter between Christians and their God, among Christians, and between Christians and the world. The parish imagined as an ecclesial place, situated in particular human and ecclesial contexts, points us toward the concreteness of those encounters as an expression of communion. Indeed, communion grows out of the baptism of particular flesh-and-blood persons, expressing itself in the particular cultural style of their prayer and celebration of the Eucharist. An actual diocesan bishop supervises and symbolizes their communion, in collaboration with the parish priests he ordained and knows and with local lay pastoral leaders he has encouraged. In a parish, the particular faithful gathered work, despite their human limitations, to cooperate with the Spirit's calling and distribution of gifts.

All this occurs in a contingent, transient world. We cannot do all that we hope for, and sooner or later the Spirit calls others to serve in our place. A parish may even die—may cease to function as an ecclesial place where communion unfolds. Particular parishes are not necessarily required for God's eschatological plan. God will continue to seed communion in the Church and mission in the world whether or not the parishes we attend choose to participate in either. In the eschatological view, both the juridical structures and the shared baptismal identity of a parish operate more as gateways than guarantees of communion. The Spirit blows where she wills and may decide to seed these bonds elsewhere. We should be mindful of the warning given in Matthew's gospel by John the Baptist to the formally religious people of his time: "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matt 3:9, NABRE).

### **Author biography**

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