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The Shared Parish

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AMERICAN CATHOLIC STUDIES NEWSLETTER

CUSHWA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

The Shared Parish

A

disproportionate number of immigrants both now and throughout our nation's history have been Roman Catholics, from Irish and Germans to Italians and Poles to Mexicans and Filipinos. Demographic transformation and intercultural relations have regularly been a part of parish life in the United States. Yet not every era has dealt with changes in the same way. For much of the 19th and early 20th century, national or ethnic parishes welcomed arriving immigrants. Irish fleeing the potato famine and Poles seeking religious freedom and work both found spiritual homes in parishes completely arranged for their needs. In more recent decades, however, most immigrants join existing parishes, forming distinct communities within the parish, each with its own masses and ministries. At All Saints parish in the Midwestern diocese of Port Jefferson

(both pseudonyms), for example, the arrival of immigrants from Mexico led to the establishment of two weekend Spanish masses in addition to the three English masses. The parish hosts parallel religious education and youth ministry programs. In parishes like All Saints, which I call *shared parishes*, arriving and resident communities develop in parallel fashion, occasionally coming together for celebrations, meetings, or liturgy.

Since the late 1980s and '90s, immigration has become a national phenomenon, no longer regionalized in border states and the Northeast Corridor. In this context *shared parishes* have become numerous and nearly ubiquitous. Already by the late 1990s, 75 percent of Latino/a Catholic communities shared their parish facilities with another non-Latino/a group.¹ A 2002 survey of faith communities serving select immigrant groups in Washington, D.C., showed that 73 percent

see Shared Parish, page 7

Important: Cushwa Newsletter Going Green

The spring 2011 issue of the *American Catholic Studies Newsletter* will be the last printed issue. Subsequently, we will publish the newsletter in pdf format each semester, available at no cost, on the Cushwa Center's web site www.nd.edu/~cushwa. If you wish to receive biannual e-mail notification when we post a new issue, please send an e-mail to cushwa.1@nd.edu with your current e-mail address. Thank you and we look forward to seeing you online in fall 2011.

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of Catholic immigrant faith communities were part of a larger parish while 27 percent were national parishes.² Studying the masstimes.org web site, Ken Johnson-Mondragón found that 45 percent of parishes in five geographically distributed dioceses had masses in two languages.³ Studying diocesan websites in 2009, I found that 71 percent of parishes in the Archdiocese of Miami, 34 percent in the Diocese of Knoxville in Tenn., 16 percent in the Diocese of Port Jefferson in the Midwest, 2 percent in the Diocese of Helena in Mont., 23 percent in the Diocese of Baker in Ore., and 52 percent of the parishes in the Diocese of Oakland in Calif. had mass in more than one language.

Cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner once wrote about social change, “Change is largely a by-product, an unintended consequence of action.”⁴ No conference of bishops or other leadership body ever decided that contemporary Catholic immigrants should be accommodated in *shared parishes*. Instead, when the current wave of immigration took definitive shape, an infrastructure of urban and rural churches already existed; Catholic populations were on the move; priests’ numbers were dwindling; and the national or ethnic parish no longer appeared uniquely suited to U.S. Catholics’ needs. When arriving cultural groups needed a parish home, forming a new ministry within a parish began to look like the best ad hoc solution. Shared parishes are changing and shaping U.S. Catholicism in ways we barely understand. To get a better idea of this impact, let us focus in on a particular parish.

All Saints Parish, Havenville⁵

All Saints Roman Catholic Church in Havenville was established in 1860, and it continues to serve as the only Catholic parish in a majority Protestant town. About two decades ago, local factories began employing increasing numbers of Latin American immigrant workers to offset a labor shortage. By the mid-1990s All Saints initiated a distinct ministry for

those workers. That ministry has continued to evolve until the present. Today, All Saints is effectively a *shared parish* in structure, with a Euro-American pastor and a Mexican associate pastor, masses each weekend in English and Spanish, and parallel ministries for Euro-American and Latino/a communities. At the time of my study the Latino/a parish community had two masses, 20 ministry programs, and a Sunday afternoon mass attendance often exceeding 500 during the school year, while the Euro-American community had three masses, about 30 ministry programs, and a late morning mass attendance of up to 375 during the school year. From August 2007 to early July 2008, I conducted 10 months of field research at All Saints, more or less a parish calendar year. During my months at All Saints, my work included ethnographic observation, interviews, oral histories, focus groups, archival study, and tours of the area. I also trained a team of parishioners from both cultural communities who made field notes on their own observations, conducted ethnographic interviews, and offered their interpretations of our work. I frequently made informal and written reports on the ongoing findings both to parish leadership and at Sunday mass.

In my research I encountered a city and parish demographically transformed. In 1990, 4.9 percent of the population of Havenville identified as Hispanic. The *American Community Survey* estimate of 2005-07 found that 23.9 percent of residents were Hispanic. According to state board of education figures, in 1990-91, just 7.7 percent of students from the local school district were identified as coming from any “minority” group. By 2007 when I arrived, 37 percent of students identified as Hispanic, not counting other groups. Multiple Latino/a-owned restaurants and stores had grown up in the then-booming downtown business district. Threaded through this transformed city were the separate but interconnected worlds that Latino/as and Euro-Americans inhabited.

Each community had its own newspapers, stores, hair salons, and automotive repair shops, though some institutions — favorite restaurants, government offices, medical clinics, Wal-Mart — served both communities.

Intercultural Negotiations at All Saints

Scholars and other observers looking at parishes like All Saints — *shared parishes* — have often resorted to what I think of as a “typological” analysis to deal with intercultural relations. They present the qualities of each cultural group in opposition to the other across a series of categories, some of the most well-known being time, leadership style, and approach to popular religion. In these analyses, for example, the programmatic and linear nature of time in Euro-American culture is often contrasted with the person-centered and cyclical nature of time in Latin cultures. While well-intended, such analysis makes cultural groups into ideal types, abstractions, severed from actual Catholics living in their real-life context.

A better approach is to begin with concrete practical dilemmas and to analyze the trajectories of intercultural encounters they produce. Sharing a parish — worship space, the school, parish meeting rooms, parking lots, occasionally bilingual services — necessarily entails what might be called “intercultural negotiations,” exchanges that bring into relief the complex cultural terrain of a shared parish. At All Saints one of the key practical dilemmas I noted involved the juxtaposition of two religious education programs. Father Ignacio, the associate pastor, had arrived from Mexico in 2000 and immediately set about building a comprehensive religious education program in Spanish. He had been shocked to find few *ceremonias* occurring — that is, weddings or *quinceañeras* — and that hundreds of children and many young adults had never made their first communion. In the end, he made faith formation a pillar of the Latino/a community’s ministry. Many people felt this formation emphasis both

inoculated parishioners against Evangelical and Pentecostal proselytizing and helped with the cultural disorientation, solitude, and insecurity many young immigrants experienced.

The English catechetical program, on the other hand, addressed a different cultural milieu, one that included low

birthrates, the out-migration of young people of marriage age, and, most important, multiple activities available for school-age children. It was a smaller program than the Spanish one, and a desire to compete for families' limited time translated to easier requirements.

Conversely the

Spanish program depended on a commitment to sacraments as cultural rites of passage and tackled religious literacy through comprehensive educational discipline: weekly teacher training, parental presence at bimonthly meetings, and required attendance of children at class and mass. The co-existence of these two different approaches required ongoing intercultural negotiations.

Initially, Father Ignacio had to defend his methods and the entire enterprise of education in Spanish to both the pastor and Joanne Joyner, the Euro-American religious education director. Large attendance, however, seemed to justify it in the end. Some years later, the issue became Latino/a children laterally moving to the English program. This left confusion as to whether parents were attending required meetings on either side, and Father Ignacio implied at a staff meeting that Joyner should prevent young Latinos/as from going to the English classes, since their families' real intention was to shirk their duty and buck his authority in accessing an easier program. To Joyner, families were acclimating to the United States, prefer-

ring English for their children. Both heard the other's position on the matter, but neither seemed to take their counterpart seriously. In the end they had to content themselves with détente at this and other staff meetings.

Religious education mirrored an even more common practical dilemma in the

parish: the need for community space, including both parish rooms and parking outside. A disproportionately young Latino/a community with more children and growing in its number of groups and ministries clearly needed more space. At the same time, most members of the Euro-American

community were not familiar with a parish structure where parallel ministries existed for distinct cultural groups, and just recently the Euro-American community had paid off an expansion of parish facilities and parking lots. Longtime community members were forced to negotiate over space they never foresaw they would have to share. Concretely, some teachers from the parish school (where the Spanish religious education classes were now held) began to complain about items in the classrooms ending up out of place. Word spread among Euro-American parishioners that the Latinos/as did not take proper care of the rooms they used and were not orderly. The accusations irritated Father Ignacio, who felt Latinos/as were being held to an unfair standard. Yet he mostly complained about this internally to other Latinos/as and urged them to be diligent in leaving things in order. Manuel Nieves, who became the volunteer director of Spanish religious education, complained to me that school personnel asked him about the whereabouts of every pencil, so that he found it easier to buy extra pencils rather than launch into another investiga-

tion with his catechists.

Nieves and Father Ignacio were showing a preference for strategies of avoidance accompanied by minimal necessary interaction. This approach was common practice at All Saints. At a Saturday morning workshop, I heard Father Ignacio give a large gathering of attendees specific instructions about parking as part of his welcome, remarking that they must head off the preconceived notions Euro-Americans had. More than one Euro-American parishioner suggested to me that the solution to culture clash in the parking lot each week was to park on the street or get out quickly after mass, avoiding the issue entirely. Avoidance, of course, is not a surprising approach when few adults in both communities speak the other community's language. It also fits with the practical situation of two communities living in distinct cultural worlds within the same parish and city: crossing over to the other cultural world is an uncomfortable and risky venture.

Nevertheless, human life being what it is, the avoidance strategy was not always successful. One mother in the Euro-American community reported about friends of hers going door-to-door looking for English speakers in the Latino/a religious education classes, seeking in frustration the person who had double parked behind them. Parishioner Joan Bucher came for a meeting she had organized in the church basement on a parish pilgrimage. As she puts it,

I got down there, and they were all over the place down there. . . [The parish secretary] told me that they would be down there, but they would be winding up. But they have the whole basement of the church. And I said [and they responded] "No English, no English."

She finally secured someone able to speak with her in English, and the group was actually more than willing to move across the floor to accommodate her group. But she was visibly annoyed, and she ended her account of the incident by noting, "But you know, I've supported

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this parish for 40-some years, not tremendously financially, but I've been a big part of it, I've tried to put myself into it, and I should count for something."

Power and Negotiation

The word "negotiation" may suggest to some an exchange between two equal parties, but it seldom functions that way in the world of nations or shared parishes. Intercultural negotiations at All Saints occurred in and were fundamentally shaped by an environment of unequal power. How could it be otherwise? Before the migration of the 1990s, Havenville was largely culturally homogenous. When hundreds of mostly poor migrants did arrive, the contrast could not have been clearer. The Euro-American community at All Saints enjoyed socio-economic diversity, residential stability, U.S. citizenship, English fluency, and cultural and racial privilege. The Latino/a community, on the other hand, was disproportionately poor and working class, had many relative newcomers with almost no adult U.S. citizens, was culturally socialized elsewhere, and was racially "other" to this part of the Midwest. Some Euro-American parish leaders did not welcome this observation of a difference in privilege and power; they seemed to interpret it as an accusation. It is important to take this seriously: they were not to blame. They also found themselves confronting social realities forged by forces beyond their specific control, such as global market capitalism, transnational migration patterns, and U.S. cultural traditions about racial categorization and formation. Yet individualism often makes it difficult to distinguish blame from responsibility. Few of us directly create either the privileges or the harm involved in social inequality or institutionalized racism, but we remain responsible as participants in the communities that struggle with them.

Power differences create sensitivities regarding appearances. It is as much a story of *perceptions* about influence and access as it is a story about the actual balance of such things. A 30-something Latina at All Saints did not hesitate to designate as racism the relative shabbiness of a Spanish liturgical book compared to the English version, even though behind the scenes a

Euro-American couple had recently made a rather large donation to replace that same book. Perhaps even more confounding, many Euro-American parishioners did not (or could not) recognize the unequal power relationship between the two communities. They resented or became angry at having to make concessions to the presence of the Latino/a community, having to negotiate across language or cultural barriers. As members of a dominant culture in a formerly homogenous city, many saw the parish and Havenville as a cultural field properly belonging to them and now being disturbed. Not surprisingly, my survey results suggested more resentment and resistance among parishioners over 40 with stronger memories of pre-1990 cultural homogeneity.

Legality and Common Sense in Havenville

An additional complicating factor in intercultural negotiations at All Saints was the fact that a certain number of Latino/a parishioners did not have legal papers to work and live in the U.S. This gave life in the Latino/a community a precarious edge, making people leery to plant roots or get involved. A recent Pew study confirmed that this anxiety affects not only the undocumented but all immigrants as well as their native born family members and friends.⁶ Euro-American discomfort with and animosity to the presence of undocumented immigrants surely increases this anxiety. Several Euro-American interviewees expressed to me or to the team members their displeasure, the following comment being representative: "I am not at all in favor of illegal immigration. I don't care who it is." People also noted this to me in everyday conversation, and during my 10 months in Havenville it appeared pointedly in columns and letters in the local (English) newspapers. Perhaps not surprisingly, I noted a resistance in the Latino/a community to parish involvement that brought prolonged contact with the Euro-American community.

Many Euro-Americans considered the problem with illegal immigration and illegal immigrants to be obvious and self-evident. Yet, at the same time, this way of thinking about it seemed equally unreasonable and impractical to members of

the Latino/a community. Human beings generally think of self-evident conclusions as common sense, which we assume to be universal. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, however, has shown how common sense functions as an ad hoc cultural system. It characterizes the immediate world in ways we presume to be natural and practical, but what is "natural" and "practical" actually differs from culture to culture.⁷ Thus, I listened to a 40-something Euro-American man tell me that he disagreed with his in-laws' desire to deport all undocumented Mexicans, but he could still see why they think such immigration is morally wrong. As he put it, "that's why they call it illegal." Many Euro-Americans made strong connections between morality and law. On the other hand, I heard stories from Latino/a community members about keeping account of their different names on different identification cards and avoiding roads well-traveled by the police. To them, having to make such clandestine arrangements in a nation that simultaneously integrated them into the economy as laborers and consumers was nothing less than hypocrisy. They resented the label of "illegals" being applied to people who went about their lives working diligently, attending to their children, and volunteering at church.

Unintended Consequences

Once during my time in Havenville, a pastor from one of the Protestant churches in town asked me if the Catholic church in Havenville might be better served — if there were resources available — by two parishes, one Euro-American and one Latino. This, of course, was the case for much of U.S. Catholic history, where any given locality might have had two or three different Catholic churches — such as the Irish, German, and Italian parishes in my parents' hometown. But the point is moot: we do not have such resources available. Our diocesan budgets are limited, our immigrants poor, our parishes long established, and our priests and professional staff relatively few in number. I return to Ortner's observation about social change as *unintended* consequence of action. No church official planned the shared parish as the ideal response to the great demographic transformations

re-making Roman Catholicism in the United States. Nevertheless, both statistics and anecdotal evidence suggest that just as the national parish dominated earlier eras of immigration and the suburban parish dominated mid-to-late 20th-century Catholicism, more and more the shared parish is becoming the reality of local Catholicism in our own time. Whether or not we planned it, we will be served well reflecting on its internal intercultural workings and its future among us.

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Brett C. Hoover, C.S.P. recently earned his Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley with the dissertation: "What Are We Doing Here? Local Theologies of Mission from a Shared Catholic Parish in the Midwest." His book manuscript on *shared parishes* is currently under review for publication.

NOTES

¹Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, "The PARAL Study: The National Survey of Leadership for Latino Parishes and Congregations," Part I (Brooklyn, NY: Religion in Society and Culture, 2002), 3.

²Michael W. Foley and Dean R. Hoge, *Religion and the New Immigrants: How Faith Communities Form Our Newest Citizens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74-77. The Catholic immigrant groups studied were Salvadorans (along with a small number of other Latinos/as), Nigerian Igbos, and Francophone Africans from Senegal and the Gambia.

³Ken Johnson-Mondragón, "Ministry in Multicultural and National/Ethnic Parishes: Evaluating the Findings of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project" (Stockton, CA: Instituto Fe y Vida/National Association for Lay Ministry, 2008), 13-14. The dioceses were: Charleston, SC; Brooklyn, NY; El Paso, TX; Oakland, CA; and Wichita, KS.

⁴Sherry Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984): 157.

⁵All Saints, Havenville, Port Jefferson diocese, and all proper names are pseudonyms for the protection of parishioners in this study.

⁶Mark Hugo Lopez and Susan Minishkin, "2008 National Survey of Latinos: Hispanics See Their Situation in U.S. Deteriorating" (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), 9-12.

⁷Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 73-93.