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Generations and Cultures: The Future of Parish Life in the United States

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tions, for-profit and nonprofit, religious and academic, community and government. We can avoid challenging the motives of others. We can advocate our principles and priorities with conviction, integrity, civility and respect for others.

We can look for common ground and seek the common good. We can encourage all the institutions in our society to work together to reduce joblessness, promote economic growth, overcome poverty, increase prosperity and make the shared sacrifices and — even compromises — necessary to begin to heal our broken economy.

The seriousness and the peril of the current economic situation require clear commitment from all sectors to come together to shape and rebuild a stronger economy that safeguards the lives and dignity of all, especially providing opportunities for work. No one entity alone can turn the economy around, and every institution must move beyond its own particular interests.

Structures for dialogue leading to comprehensive and coordinated action need to be established or strengthened among leaders in government, business, unions, investment, banking, education, health care, philanthropy, religious communities, the jobless and those living in poverty so that the common ground can be laid for pursuing the common good in economic life. As the Catholic bishops have insisted, "The Catholic way is to recognize the essential role and the complementary responsibilities of families, communities, the market and government to work together to overcome poverty and advance human dignity" ("A Place at the Table," 18).

Conclusion: A Word of Hope and Commitment

For Christians, it is not enough to acknowledge current difficulties. We are people of hope committed to prayer, to help those facing hard times and to work with others to build a better economy. Our faith gives strength, direction and confidence in these tasks. As Pope Benedict encourages us:

"On this earth there is room for everyone: Here the entire human family must find the resources to live with dignity, through the help of nature itself — God's gift to his children — and through

hard work and creativity" (*Caritas in Veritate*, 50).

We must remember that at the heart of everything we do as believers must be love, for it is love which honors the dignity of work as participation in the act of God's creation, and it is love which values the dignity of the worker, not just for the work he or she does, but above all for the person he or she is. This call of love is also a work of faith and an expression of hope.

On this Labor Day in 2011, in the midst of continuing economic turmoil, we are called to renew our commitment to the God-given task of defending human life and dignity, celebrating work and defending workers with both hope and conviction. This is a time for prayer, reflection and action. In the words of our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI:

"The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negatives ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future" (*Caritas in Veritate*, 21). ■

Generations and Cultures: The Future of Parish Life in the United States

Father Hoover, CSP

"U.S. parishes are becoming a new creation, something different," *Paulist Father Brett C. Hoover said in an address on the future of parish life in the U.S. Father Hoover, a visiting assistant professor in the theological studies department at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and a co-founder of the website BustedHalo.com, spoke at a pastoral exchange conference at Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany. The July 8-10 event, titled "Between Crisis and Renewal: The Parish and Its Theology in a Comparison of Two Local*

Churches: Germany and the USA," culminated six years of pastoral reflection and exchange between the Archdiocese of Chicago and six German dioceses. The CrossingOver project looked at the past, present and future of parish life in both countries. (See Origins, Vol. 41, No. 12, for more texts from the conference.) Father Hoover spoke about two large trends affecting the future of parishes: demographic changes in the U.S. church and the declining rate of participation by the younger generations. He said that with a growing Hispanic population, "U.S. Catholics need to find a new narrative not so exclusively identified with Catholics of European ancestry" and said he feared that if this doesn't happen, "the credibility of the church itself will be at stake." He spoke about what he calls "shared parishes," where Hispanics and non-Hispanics share the same parish but do not interact much and where tensions exist. He said there are two strategies for a parish to deal with young people today: one is to cater to the so-called "orthodox" Catholics and the other is to engage the undecided, "what might be called the evangelizing or mission-oriented strategy." Father Hoover's address follows.

My unenviable task here is to reflect upon the future of the parish in the United States. Speaking about the future of anything feels dangerous. We know how easily unexpected changes and unintended consequences reshape our world on a moment's notice.

The most satisfying theological accounts of the future of the church have always been eschatological trajectories rather than pastoral prognostications. Eschatological trajectories, all the way back to St. Paul, remind us that the parish, like all concrete gatherings of the church, is really an interim community, a *paroikia*, until the day when God becomes all in all.¹

Conscious of this, I will try to limit my remarks here to an analysis of two key demographic trends in U.S. Catholicism. One is our increasing cultural diversity as spurred by migration; the other is the declining rate of participation by the younger generations. In this way I hope to evoke a practical and theological sense of what the future of the parish might be and how we ought to respond to it. I will finish with an eschatological trajectory of my own —

that of the new creation.

Probably the most important change in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States since the reception of Vatican II has been its present demographic shift. Large-scale migration from Latin America and the Pacific Rim are reinventing U.S. Catholicism. Our church has always included significant cultural diversity, much of it of German cultural heritage across the 19th century.

As William Clark told us, however, in the 1920s, the federal government of the United States shut off migration just as that migration had reached new levels. In 1910, about 15 percent of the population had been born in another country. From 1930 to 1970, the government reported historic lows in immigration. By 1970 less than 5 percent of the U.S. population had been born in another country. Since the 1970s, however, migration from Latin America and Asia has dramatically changed our cultural landscape. By 2009, 12.4 percent of the U.S. population had been born elsewhere. Fifty-three percent of the foreign-born came from Latin America, and almost 30 percent from a single nation-state, Mexico.²

Still, at this time the future of migration remains unclear. Though much political pressure exists to “cut off” immigration as in the 1920s, that seems logistically unlikely or even physically impossible. However, there are indications — among them the declining birth rate in Mexico — that suggest that population growth through immigration does not have an indefinite upward trajectory.³ Nevertheless, the Pew Center for Religious Research estimates that the ratio of immigrants to the general population should reach nearly 20 percent in 2050, one in five.⁴

Whatever happens, our nation and church have already been and will continue to be transformed. Over the last decade the Hispanic population of the United States grew at nine times the rate of the rest of the population, according to the 2010 census. Census projections see the Hispanic population tripling in the first half of the 21st century while the white non-Hispanic population will grow about 4 percent.

Currently, one out of six residents of the United States has Latin American heritage. The Pew Center calculates that

this should rise to become more than a quarter of the population by 2050.⁵ To offer an anecdotal account of what this means, my students — on a trip to Mexico City — asked a Mexican theologian what the third-largest city in Mexico was. His wry reply: “Los Angeles, Calif.”

What does all this mean for our parishes? Data show that Catholics far outnumber Protestants among immigrants.⁶ Mexico, the source of nearly a third of all migrants, is more than 83 percent Roman Catholic.⁷ As to what proportion of the church now and in the future will be Hispanic, I tell you frankly that nobody knows.

“In many parishes the English Masses tend to be many but smaller, and the Spanish Masses tend to be few and packed with people. Put another way, many Catholics go on without awareness of the massive demographic changes going on around them.”

Current estimates vary from 29 percent to 33 percent to 35 percent.⁸ It may well be substantially more. The sociologists Paul Perl, Jennifer Greely and Mark Gray argue that Hispanic Catholics get undercounted in surveys.⁹ The Archdiocese of Chicago reports that 40 percent of its Catholics are of Hispanic origin.¹⁰

This would suggest a big shift in U.S. parishes, a move away from focusing on the Americanized descendants of Europeans to a parish life that envisions itself as a nexus of cultural diversity. Yet there are reasons to believe this has not happened.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University has shown that despite the growth of (especially Spanish-speaking) immigrant communities, almost three-quarters of Masses in the United States remain in English. Its data also show that multicultural parishes receive a disproportionate number of immigrants.¹¹

This fits with more anecdotal reports that in many parishes the English Masses tend to be many but smaller, and the Spanish Masses tend to be few and packed with people. Put another way, many Catholics go on without awareness of the massive demographic changes going on around them.

What are the obstacles that prevent a shift to a more realistic response to present demographics? First, we struggle as a national church to let go of the powerful narrative for parish life that has held sway over the last half-century. Robert Schreier mentioned at the beginning of this conference that we need to be more aware and more critical of our stories as a community. The “migrant-to-mainstream” narrative of the past half-century sees American Catholics as long-ago European migrants who have achieved mainstream success by surviving Protestant discrimination and being lifted up through distinct Catholic institutions — parishes, schools, hospitals and universities. Historians have often marked the 1960 election of the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, as the triumph of this narrative.¹²

Parishioners experienced its effects in increasing intermarriage across religions and the decline of the polemical distinction between Catholics and Protestants. Cultural narratives are persistent, and as anthropologist Sherry Ortner has demonstrated, they shape the development of religious institutions.¹³ As sociologist Steven Dorné observes, cultural frameworks make some things eminently imaginable and other things unthinkable or invisible.¹⁴

The persistent cultural narrative of migrant to mainstream tends to focus attention on middle-class Euro-American Catholics but leaves others essentially invisible. And yet soon the invisible will be the majority. A parish staff in a Los Angeles suburb doubted the significant presence of Filipino immigrants in their midst until the pastor bid them to actually count them on Sunday morning. They were astonished.

U.S. Catholics need to find a new narrative not so exclusively identified with Catholics of European ancestry. We could see the parish in the United States as a gathering for diverse pilgrims, a restless community gathered by the Spirit and integrally connected to the larger pilgrim people of God en

route to God's reign. I fear that if we do not learn a new narrative the credibility of the church itself will be at stake yet again.

I would like to move now from the national ecclesial landscape to the parish itself. Despite the persistence of the migrant-to-mainstream narrative, both ethnically distinct and multiracial or multiethnic local faith communities do exist in the United States. In fact, today Roman Catholic parishes are more likely to be culturally and racially diverse than mainline Protestant or Evangelical communities.¹⁵

But we have to be clear what that means. Multicultural congregations in the evangelical Christian tradition in the United States unite around a common worship service in English but, as religious studies scholar Kathleen Garces-Foley has shown, Roman Catholic parishes have long accepted the legitimacy of worship in multiple languages and according to different cultural accents.¹⁶ Most recently and moving on into the future, Catholics have accommodated immigrants by adding cultural or linguistic communities to already established parishes rather than form new parishes.

In what I call the *shared parish* each cultural community has distinct worship and ministries, though they often share clergy and parish facilities. Shared parishes have one central administration and one set of records, but they are in essence multiple communities. Social and ecclesial factors have helped to create them: large-scale migration, suburbanization, urban gentrification and parish consolidation. Sociologists refer to these parishes as *parallel congregations*, emphasizing the pluralism involved. I prefer the term *shared parish*, in part because it preserves the terminology of parish, historically important in U.S. Catholicism.

The shared parish terminology also accents the challenges created by the process of sharing the parish facilities. In many places a shortage of bilingual persons and resources means most parishioners simply avoid one another even while passing in the street.¹⁷ Yet leaders in the distinct communities participate in arduous intercultural negotiations over meeting space, religious education for children, parking and the occasional multilingual worship, each

controversy fraught with cultural misunderstanding and sensitivity to power differences.¹⁸

Hispanic religious educators in one parish, for example, complain that Euro-American Catholic school personnel launch an investigation every time a pencil disappears in the schoolrooms they share. Services are sometimes interrupted when one group blocks another in the parking lot. A long discussion erupted at the parish council meeting at one parish over the lack of representation of Hispanic ministries in the parish directory.

"The persistent cultural narrative of migrant to mainstream tends to focus attention on middle-class Euro-American Catholics but leaves others essentially invisible. And yet soon the invisible will be the majority."

These negotiations and clashes of culture are only likely to continue. U.S. Catholics on all sides will be better off when we learn to accept that confusing negotiations across cultures have become part of our present and future responsibility for church unity. We cannot and should not eliminate our cultural differences. That would not be *koinonia* but rather some form of uniformity. Instead, through the work of intercultural negotiation, we confirm the bonds of communion established by the Holy Spirit through baptism and celebrated in the Eucharist. Across the tensions, the interaction can teach us patience and mutual respect. It must become as routine as religious education or bingo or coffee and doughnuts.

Culture clash within our parishes calls us to greater emphasis on reconciliation. A spike in anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States has created hostility and mistrust. In one parish I studied Euro-American Catholics found it self-evident that crossing the border without papers was not just illegal but immoral. Yet many if not most of

the Mexican-origin parishioners in the same parish had done just that, and to them it was merely a matter of practical arrangements when companies wanted to hire them and stores welcomed their business. Problematically, anti-immigrant sentiment dovetails with the loss and grief that Euro-American parishioners experience in finding that their parishes no longer belong just to them even as they have financially and pastorally supported them for decades.¹⁹

The pastoral theologian Stephen Dudek, a multicultural parish pastor himself, says that dramatic demographic changes experienced by native-born communities, coupled with the painful emotional dislocation of migration, make shared parishes into "crucibles of grief." Some theologians, such as Gemma Tulud Cruz and Daniel Groody, have recognized the paschal nature of migrants' journeys, but the lesson also applies in a less dramatic way for everyone at a transformed parish.²⁰ Parish ministry of the future has to learn to contend with this grief, accepting it, helping people heal and moving everyone toward a reconciliation that does not require uniformity.

I would like to transition now to the second demographic trend I mentioned at the beginning — decline of religious participation among the young — by pointing to a dilemma about ministry to the young brought on by migration, that of Hispanic young people. According to the American Community Survey from 2005-2009, the median age of non-Hispanic whites in the U.S. is nearly 41, but the median age of Hispanics is 27. Fifty-eight percent of Catholics under 35 are Hispanic. Sixty-seven percent of churchgoing Catholics under 35 are Hispanic.²¹

According to statistics compiled by the Instituto Fe y Vida in California, nearly half of Hispanics between 18 and 29 were born in this country.²² U.S. parishes have not really found an effective style of ministry for young Hispanics born in the United States. We know what immigrants need: resources for survival, a place where they can pray in their own language, help with adaptation to American society. I am not sure we know at all what the children or descendants of Latin American immigrants need. Or that we have even asked.

Many clergy assume that the fluent

English of second- or third-generation Hispanics makes them ready to attend Euro-American Masses and participate in a culturally assimilated youth ministry. Yet contemporary study of migration suggests that this older model of linear assimilation makes no sense. People adjust at different rates in different parts of their life; they choose what to accept and what to reject about the new culture.²³ Theologian Gary Riebeck-Estrella takes note of how Hispanic young people in the United States adjust quickly to the English language and the work culture of the U.S., but decades may elapse before family and religious patterns change significantly.²⁴

This raises the question of ministry and religious education for primarily English-speaking Hispanic young people whose religious socialization has taken place mainly according to Latin American religious culture. In one parish, young people proclaimed themselves bored by the unfamiliar official vocabulary of the Spanish Mass but found the English Mass “weird,” that is, culturally incomprehensible.

A more poignant example occurred when I met a young woman in a Spanish confirmation program. Able to read and write only in English, she wrote a short summary of what she had learned thus far. She turned to me as she worked and asked, “How do you say *Espíritu Santo* in English?” We need new models of parish life rooted in some bilingualism and able to combine Latin American and American Catholic heritages as the young people do. Parishes in the American Southwest, especially New Mexico, have long had ministries that combine languages and cultures and may provide us with good examples.

I would like to discuss one final trend, one as familiar to our German audience as it is to Americans. In U.S. parishes, younger people of all cultural backgrounds demonstrate less and less traditional religious commitment.²⁵ They go to church at a lower rate and rate religion as less important. In a perhaps apocryphal story told by young adult ministry expert Michelle Miller, a young Catholic man was asked about Vatican II, and he asked if it was the pope’s summer home.

Some Catholic leaders in the United States see the figures on youth participation and complain about increasing secularization. They may be right, but

this complaining does not really tell us much about the nature of secularization among American young people or what we might do to address it. True, more Americans from younger generations choose not to subscribe to any religion, yet according to the American Religious Identification Survey the vast majority of them do not describe themselves as atheists.²⁶ Two-thirds of 12th-graders do not identify as alienated or hostile toward religion.²⁷ This is not the same process of secularization we find in Europe.

“Problematically, anti-immigrant sentiment dovetails with the loss and grief that Euro-American parishioners experience in finding that their parishes no longer belong just to them even as they have financially and pastorally supported them for decades.”

Sociologist Christian Smith’s work also points out the decreasing religious literacy of young people, and it also notes a kind of homogenization of religion across religions groups.²⁸ A manifestation of this homogenization figures in the work of sociologists Claude Fisber and Michael Hout, who note that the rise of the “no religion” phenomenon has statistically coincided with increasing publicity about the religious right in the United States.²⁹

The disproportionately young people who do not choose a religion seem to associate organized religion in general with a more polemical form of religious and political conservatism. The American religious right, in other words, has proved successful in identifying “religion” with their perspective. But it seems that the majority of young people do not identify with this perspective.

One survey among Americans 18-25 years old shows only 16 percent of Roman Catholics as highly religious. Almost a quarter are decidedly not religious, and 60 percent are simply undecided.³⁰ All this contradicts a common impression that young people in the U.S.

are fundamentally more religiously conservative than their elders. Instead, those young people who *are* more religiously and politically conservative — often self-described as “orthodox Catholics” — are simply more likely to seem like “real Catholics” to their peers and everyone else.

In such an environment, parishes have a choice if they wish to address young people. One strategy is to cater to the so-called orthodox, developing the “contrast society” that Professor Mette mentioned or what Robert Schreiter called the “enclave for the elect.” But only a small number of parishes will successfully appeal to this small group. The Franciscan University at Steubenville in Ohio holds many well-attended events for young people, but they draw from all across the country.

The other strategy is to decide to address the undecided, what might be called the evangelizing or mission-oriented strategy. True, the undecided may increasingly look on all organized religion as the same. They may erroneously think that Catholics reject salvation for non-Christians or that we cannot abide the evolutionary biology. But parishes could become “centers for seekers,” places for tentatively exploring reality from the increasingly underutilized perspective of faith in community. This is a different approach from focusing solely on teaching correct doctrine. Teaching correct doctrine — as in the apologetics movement — may in fact educate people in the faith, but by itself it cannot evoke an encounter with the risen Christ. Retreats and spiritually focused outreach could.

Not that religious education for adults should be left behind. Parishes could choose to become outlets for the communication of Catholic tradition in language young people understand, making use of social media and courses and discussions that assume no previous knowledge. Parishes could accent hospitality for newcomers and invitation to those who do not come. But to do so, parish staffs have to work on preaching and liturgy less focused on the chosen and more focused on the occasional visitor. They will also need to pay more attention to those sacramental events — baptisms, weddings, funerals — that draw the unchurched.

In short, U.S. parishes of the future

will have to focus less attention inward — including on our endless internal debates about the meaning of Vatican II — and focus more attention on outreach — on seeing our parishes as gathering spaces for 1) immigrants and their children, and 2) for other young people who have less and less of an idea of what Catholic Christianity is about. Some parishes will surely not survive this transition, and some may decide — perhaps honorably so — to focus their attention on comforting those who grieve over a lost world.

“Parishes could become ‘centers for seekers,’ places for tentatively exploring reality from the increasingly under-utilized perspective of faith in community.”

To survive for the long term, however, parishes have to commit themselves to bearing witness to the complex riches of Catholic tradition in myriad ways. The parish in the United States remains the most widespread manifestation of Catholic Christianity. Along with Protestant congregations, it remains more widespread than McDonald's and several other fast-food restaurants combined.³¹

All I am suggesting here — more acceptance of the struggles of diversity, more attention to the culturally hybrid existence of Hispanic young people and more outreach to the young at the parish level — all this may sound like a tall order. In a recent homily, the Jesuit theologian William Clark spoke about the “improbability of the Spirit.” He quoted the Scriptures, noting how God chose uneducated fishermen as apostles. We might add that God chose a tender of sycamore trees as a prophet and a young shepherd as a king.

In the same way, the Spirit has also chosen us. Especially for us Americans here — church leaders in an internally focused, divided and often culturally encapsulated church — we are oddly chosen to witness to a new parish life that is more diverse and more outreach-focused. The Filipino-American theologian Faustino Cruz once said to me,

“Since I came to the United States, I have become a new creation.” And he pointed at me and said, “But because I am here and people like me, you are becoming a new creation as well.” He was right.

And the word *becoming* has a nice theological appropriate ring to it. There is an empirical element to all change, especially demographic change: We have already become a different community. But there is also an eschatological aspect to change. We do not yet fully know what we shall be. U.S. parishes are becoming a new creation, something different. This is a difficult process, painful at times. Yet through the improbability of the Spirit, I have no doubt that we shall be something wonderful to behold.

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Immigration and the ‘Next America’: Perspectives From Our History

Archbishop Gomez

U.S. Catholics have a responsibility to bring a faith perspective to the current immigration debate and to keep