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The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism

Timothy Matovina

University of Notre Dame, timothy.matovina.1@nd.edu

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BOOK REVIEW

The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism

Brett C. Hoover

New York: New York University Press, 2014

299 pages, \$49.00 USD (hardcover)

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Reviewed by Timothy Matovina, University of Notre Dame

Brett Hoover's timely new volume is the best study I have seen on the vital topic of the growing ethnic diversity in US Catholic parishes. Engaging an impressive breadth of scholarship from multiple disciplines, *The Shared Parish* provides incisive ethnographic, sociological, historical, pastoral, and theological analyses of the ongoing transformation of the fundamental organizational unit of the Catholic Church in the United States.

Hoover focuses on the growing number of "shared parishes" that encompass "two or more cultural groups, each with distinct masses and ministries, but who share the same parish facilities" (p. 2). He conducted a ten-month ethnographic study at a Midwest parish, to which he gives the pseudonym All Saints, founded in 1860 and still the only Catholic church in a majority Protestant town. Waves of working-class Mexican immigrants arriving since around 1990 changed the demography of the small town considerably and led the parish staff to initiate Spanish-language ministries. At the time of Hoover's study, a Euro-American priest served as pastor and a Mexican émigré priest as associate pastor. Separate Sunday Masses were in both Spanish and English, as were a variety of parish ministry programs and organizations. Yet an "asymmetrical power situation" (p. 121) in the parish reflected the lower social status of Mexican immigrants in the local populace: Euro-American parishioners held more influential leadership positions, had masses in the earlier and generally more preferred time slots on Sunday morning, and the priest of their background was the pastor.

Both groups articulated often competing notions of social order as they sought to share the same parish facilities. Yet as is largely the case in the town

around them, the parishioners of All Saints tend to operate in separate but parallel fashion. Hoover found that, despite good faith efforts on both sides, disagreements and ill feelings inevitably arise. Congested parking lots are one source of strain, as in a case when a Euro-American woman went with frustration to the Spanish-language religious education classes seeking someone who spoke English to help locate the person who had double parked behind her car. Given language and cultural divides, it is not surprising that “avoidance” between Hispanics and Euro-Americans was “rampant” (p. 131). When parish school teachers complained about disorder in their rooms following Spanish-language religious education classes conducted there, for example, both the Mexican priest and the volunteer director of the Spanish religious education program were annoyed at what they considered picayune charges that sullied their community’s reputation with Euro-American parishioners. They felt school personnel scrupulously held the Hispanic community to an unfair standard. Yet they did not generally voice their protests directly to the accusers, choosing instead to encourage the Spanish-speaking catechists to be diligent in keeping order and even keeping an extra supply of pencils to replace any missing ones proactively.

The Shared Parish situates a fascinating case study within scholarly discourses ranging from intercultural communication theory to American Catholic history, from congregational studies to theologies of communion. Though Hoover’s analysis of the parochial school at All Saints parish is relatively brief, readers of this journal will find illuminating the application of his treatment of the intercultural dynamics in shared parishes to parallel dynamics in Catholic (and other) schools undergoing similar demographic transformations. Hoover joins many social scientists in rejecting the tenet of “contact theory” that physical proximity necessarily breeds greater understanding across cultures, insisting “that people must *seek* and *be taught* cultural sensitivity and intercultural expertise” (p. 181, emphasis in original).

Hoover, moreover, notes the shortcomings in what he names the “folk paradigms” of assimilation and multiculturalism, finding the former too focused on forced conformity and the latter on a static view of culture with insufficient emphasis on intergroup power relations. In response, he proposes instead a new paradigm of communion. The challenge for parishioners, faculty, or students in shared settings is to not deny or minimize the significance of difficulties and conflicts, nor to dismiss the unequal power relations that are a barrier to authentic unity, nor to conceptualize intergroup relations as a problem to be solved. Rather, both newcomers and their predecessors

must work together to “reimagine intercultural negotiations not as tension-filled ordeals but rather as the ordinary work of the Church. This is communion enacted on an everyday basis in a complex, culturally diverse parish [or school] context” (p. 208).

While Hoover would be the first to admit there is no simple blueprint to living communion, *The Shared Parish* provides profound insights into the state of parish and intercultural relations today, as well as a clear vision of the starting point and pathway forward for Catholic institutions, including parish schools, whose leaders opt to embrace this challenge and opportunity.

Timothy Matovina is Professor of Theology and Co-Director of the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame.