“Folding Up the Tents”
Catholic Imagination and Rites of Church Closure

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Here the author discusses both theoretically and practically what the past several decades of parochial restructuring in the U.S. has taught us about parish and how it is framed in the geography of the Catholic imagination.

Something in the American Catholic imagination is profoundly affected by the closing of worship spaces. In the mid-nineties I learned that lesson as a pastor trying to entice two urban parishes to join forces as a single Catholic entity for a San Francisco neighborhood. When parishes are altered or closed in large numbers, as in the rust belt of this country, the groundswell of emotions and rage has been especially pronounced. If space so diligently dedicated by the sacrifice, memories, and dense rituals of the past Catholic immigrant era of U.S. history can be so easily disposed of, how efficacious is dedicated space? How holy is holy ground if all that is needed to end its dedication is a declaration by a competent ordinary? Pastoral care and parish ritual need to assume a variety of new shapes for those undergoing closure or significant adjustment to the boundaries of a parish church.

For some the trauma symptoms after the rapid closure of parish churches serves as a wake-up call to reexamine the methods, times and attention given to the restructuring of parish churches. A Dominican principal with whom I served through

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a particularly turbulent parish and grammar school restructuring in the mid-nineties recently asked me, “What did you learn?” Her question stirred up some deep emotions, because I realized that in those five years of a painful process and implementation of pastoral planning, no one had asked that question. A bigger question began to nag at us: What might these past few decades of parochial restructurings in the United States have taught us about parish and how it is framed in the geography and Catholic imagination? This article will focus that question a bit more and suggest some general responses for pastoral care and ritual for those involved in parish consolidation and closures.

Pastoral Care: Assessing What We Learned

Liturgical theologian Capuchin Fr. Edward Foley defined pastoral care in a way that anchors it to the ebb and flow of local church: “the Church’s response to the personal, relational, and spiritual needs of persons in the context and through the agency of the local community” (Foley, 31). What happens when the “tents are folding” and a parish life cycle comes to an end?

Changing Catholic ethnic demographics in the United States, diminishing finances, deteriorating facilities, and personnel shortages have necessitated the restructuring and closures of religious institutions built during the great Euro-American immigrant period of the last century. These closures and reconfigurations have affected both the religious communities and the neighborhoods around them in significant ways. Parish staffs, members of affected local communities, and diocesan leadership will continue to face the reality of parochial restructurings through the next decade (see Schoenherr and Young 1993; Harris 2005). Each stratum of people affected by these parochial changes requires a specific form of pastoral care.

Six general parochial configurations have emerged since the 1980s throughout the United States as dioceses responded to major changes: (1) parish clusters, (2) multiparish pastors and teams, (3) closure and reshaping of parish boundaries, (4) nonordained parish directors or administrators with circuit-riding, ordained “sacramental ministers,” (5) oversight by pastoral council and local leadership (National Pastoral Life Center, 3) and (6) transition to the status of oratory or shrine.

A National Study of Recent Diocesan Efforts at Parish Reorganization in the United States by the Conference of Pastoral Planning and Council Development (CPPCD) attempted to collate pastors’ experiences of parish reorganization efforts over the last few decades. This first systematic national investigation of parish reconfiguration indicated an increase in the complexity of parishes and of pastors’ duties. Successful outcomes of parochial restructuring were connected generally to meaningful and adequate consultation, “well-conceived” training for parish
staff and leaders, and effective pastoral leadership. The CPPCD study noted that when diocesan leaders employ mandatory, consultative planning and focus on strengthening parish outreach and ministry, their efforts have a higher rate of effectiveness. Adequate consultation and training emerged as key to effective planned changes and positive parish outcomes.

Dioceses employing heavy, top-down processes have met substantial resistance, long-term canonical and civil litigation, building occupations, and protest vigils. Significant numbers (up to one-third) of parishioners seem to drop out if not convinced that proposed changes will positively affect the witness of local church. The pastor’s good leadership was most essential. In addition to strong communication skills, pastors (or nonordained parish directors) require self-confidence, trust, a passion for consultation, and a tolerance for ambiguity (Rexhausen et al., v–viii).

“Pastoring” in time of parochial transition demands having particularly strong and “visioned” leadership, possessing “peacemaking” skills, and assisting people through loss, hurt, and fear. Many noted in the study that the pastoral needs of people were greater after a merger than prior to it. The task of anticipating these needs and shaping programs to address them was the challenge for local leadership.

The conclusions of (Protestant) Rev. Gil Waldkoenig, in his *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations* highlight four distinct areas for pastoral care among religious groups faced with closure. His findings and categories are applicable to Catholic experience.

In his first category, the vanquished (my term), the sense prevails that one’s church is “deep down the only one that is really supposed to exist.” Closure is like being conquered, based on the assumption that only one religious tradition can occupy any given space. If a local church closes, ultimately it has “lost.” The congregation has been exploited, conquered, and thus vanquished. Pastoral care will need to address the sense of church that has only one face. Other histories will need to be included within the frame of the community’s storytelling. Building hope often requires the presence of survivors, those who have walked through realignment or restructuring in another place, who can tell the story.

For parishes in the second category, closure is a regression to the wilderness, a “reverting to moral degradation” and uncivilized chaos. Deep-seated theological doubts that troubled the pioneer founders on the frontier return with the reshaping of local church. When closing, the parishioners ask if they made the wrong choices

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in the struggle to keep it open. Some will doubt their election, their identity as a chosen people, and wonder if the choices made by the founders were legitimate in the first place. Pastoral care will require a “rehistoricizing,” a revision of the foundation myth of a community and a telling of the narrative through the lens of the paschal mystery.

The third type of church closure from the American historical narrative is anchored to the assimilation of once homogeneous ethnic groups. The closure the Catholic ethnic or national parish acknowledges the dissolution of a once highly cohesive family or national unit. Loss of a church means loss of family, history, and identity. For a great number of American churches, closure means that “now we’re just like everybody else.” Pastoral care will demand lavish time for grief, for storytelling, and a mournful, funeral-like rite that will allow slow acclimation to the loss. Resurrection will begin to dawn with the identification of revised ecclesial self-images and renewed sense of Catholic vitality.

The fourth type of church closure from the American historical experience is based on a consumerist, business, or corporate sense of religious identity. The closure of a church is losing to the competition for individual congregational success; not enough consumers bought its product, failing to fulfill its mission statement and balance its budget. A deep collective anxiety is rooted in the appearance of new and more “relevant” religious options—like the suburban megachurches that are attracting the young and leaving their parents behind. A local community and its faith experience are found “disposable” (Waldkoeing, 30–42). Pastoral care will need to focus on the sense of abandonment. Lament psalmody can facilitate the honest discharge of affect within the faithfulness of the God and the people of God, always on the road to a promised land just beyond the horizon.

Among the distinct shapes of merging parishes, one of the greatest pastoral challenges is creating balance among the traditions of consolidating formerly autonomous parishes and the creation of a new community. One of the gravest situations in a consolidation is when parishioners perceive that one parish has become the “winner” and another the “loser” as a result of the change. Significant “receiving parish” consolidations normally involve the building of new worship space or at least a complete renovation of the site that will house the new parish configuration. That thin line in the Catholic imagination between church
as assembly and building dictates that if one adjusts the frame of a parish’s identity, the building that houses it must be reconfigured as well.

**Folding up the Tents: Ritual as Pastoral Care**

When is it clear that a community has come to the end of its life cycle and the time has come to “fold up the tent,” how can this be facilitated? One key aspect of pastoral care is communal ritual celebration to enable parishioners to work through grief and loss, and reaffiliate in another form. The celebration of ritual has a different function for those facilitating the closure of a parish, whether in diocesan leadership, the pastor, or the local administrator, serving an important pastoral response in times of transition. Accompanying people in the process of either closure and or consolidation to another parish requires attention to shape of local church and to trauma. According to psychologist Patricia Kelly, a consultant in parish transition work in the Philadelphia area, two things are required: an expanded, more dynamic sense of church and forgiveness.

Conversations with people who have survived parish closure often note local empowerment as key to moving through the loss of parochial place to reintegration into another. It guarantees that there is a local expression of church in some form, anchored in the praxis of a concrete Catholic community in a neighborhood or region. Second, the employment of appropriate transition rituals is crucial in dealing with parishioners’ grief at the closure of a local church and integration into another (see CPPCD).

Any process of reframing a local church has much in common with the patterns of interpersonal forgiveness. Many who have been involved in parish closures in the past few decades remain unreconciled. The resentment must be consciously named and surrendered.

The presence of trauma symptoms in remaining parishioners suggests the need for pastoral agents familiar with posttraumatic stress disorder recovery paradigms. These may include establishing circles of safety, providing adequate time for lament, and exchanging the narrative of grief.

A reframed perspective, then, requires including in the narrative of the closure event the stories of those perceived as the source of an injury or trauma. In the face of tremendous loss, it is cathartic to tell this story repeatedly. But to relate the narrative in a way that includes the perspectives of those deemed responsible for those losses is heroic work. It is the work of forgiveness. Walking with some parishes through restructuring often means facing the dark side of these communities and their ministers. Ritual is most often the way this terrain is negotiated. To accomplish this, diocesan and local worship directors from across the United States have tended to glean rites from our sacramental tradition and reshape them to the task of social reconciliation.
A bishop initiates a parish; and a bishop is key to a parish’s decision to merge, close, or re-image itself. The presence of the bishop to accompany and attend to the leadership—in particular the pastors—has been often overlooked in local planning processes. The Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar, for which the local bishop is the ordinary presider, is one of the most elaborate of the church’s repertoire after the Easter Vigil. Yet, when a church closes and/or is assumed into another configuration, there is no officially approved rite. All that is required canonically is a declaration of the local ordinary to the fact. In the past decades many parish churches have been closed with nothing more than a bishop’s declaration, final Mass, and reception. This lacks a certain ritual logic. If a series of rituals dedicate a parish church, many rites are needed to close one as well.

However, not one order of ritual fits all. An urban Midwest parish wanted thanksgiving to characterize their final act together as a local Christian community, not the proposed funeral-like liturgies. Yet force-feeding gratitude to a community of worshipers before they are ready is a great imposition: Another parish was so conflicted and overwhelmed with loss and anger at those responsible for the decision for closure that a funeral-like ritual was the most appropriate way to say goodbye. The work of shaping appropriate and effective rites to the reconfiguring of local church will require skilled pastoral ministers with an extensive repertoire of rituals that express their careful attention to local needs.

Interviews in closed parishes in both Chicago and San Francisco highlighted the need for a series of ritual moments. Some of the prominent ministers of these rites have been the local bishops themselves. These moments included: (1) conflict, impasse, and reconciliation within the consolidation processes themselves; (2) the experience of parish closure; (3) leave-taking of a parish building; (4) inauguration of a newly consolidated parish; and (5) anniversary and ongoing remembrance (FDLC Newsletter, 49–53).

The desire for “honest ritual” and nonmanipulative pastoral care emerge repeatedly from interviews and recent literature on parish closures as key recommendations by survivors of parochial reshaping for those just beginning. Adequate time to grieve the loss of autonomy with its web of relationships and identity was also...
a repeated call. Here are ten ritual stations developed from liturgies parishes crafted over the past few decades for closing and consolidation. These moments of ritual are simply places to stand to look backward and forward across a community’s life. They have resonances to both pre- and post-dedication liturgies and have not emerged in any order of preference.

1. **The Reserved Sacrament**
   
   The ritual of translation of the Eucharist from the Mass of the Lord’s Supper in the Triduum was a familiar rite adapted by parish and diocesan liturgy teams for the rituals of church closure, most particularly for the rite of leave-taking from a church building. Processions with the Eucharist and its sanctuary lamp, together with other prominent symbols from a worship space (processional cross, paschal candle, oils, and Gospel Book) served as a final act of leave-taking (Wuest, 71).

2. **“The Relics” and the Patron Saint of the Parish**
   
   The “relics of a church” are often more than just the relic(s) of a patron saint. In addition to the those encased in the altar stones, gifts of furnishings, stained-glass windows, vesture, bells, and even machinery-like heating and sound systems often times have a story. Transition rituals need to give people an opportunity and adequate time to tell these stories. The passing over of the keys, registry books, and the principal icon of the patron saint to the receiving parish, accompanied with traditional hymns, orations, and storytelling, offers healing and closure (Dorsch, 33–34).

3. **Icons and Devotions**
   
   Devotional art and iconography in the church have great ties to the immigrant story of many American Catholic churches. One parish used a ritualized inventory process to collect its sacred art, giving parishioners a chance to remember the devotions like May Crowning, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, St. Anthony devotions, and the Stations of the Cross. Remembering those who gave the images and articulating gratitude for their value and history has been a way of reducing the sense of violation and invasion often articulated by some.

4. **The Main Altar**
   
   A stripping of the altar (another familiar moment from the Triduum) together with ritual washing can provide a solemn leave-taking event that can involve many people. Removing the altar linens and washing the altar—even pouring the water used into the sacrarium—provides a way to contain hurtful past memories, even skeletons in the closets.
A sung *Kyrie eleison* with incense rising from a brazier on the altar (much in the way that it was dedicated) can be a way of further making peace with end of a great era of church. A reverencing or kissing of the altar by the whole assembly (as does the presider at the beginning and end of every Eucharist) has been employed for leave-taking from the center of its ritual life.

5. **The Walls and Pulpit**

A washing of the walls and ambo has been suggested as a way to extend the cleansing of a community’s memories. If the church was consecrated, the twelve crosses on the inside walls and the two on the posts of the main entrance could be removed or washed and the water used poured into the sacrarium. A ritual washing of the ambo or podium by lectors or a Bible-study group could be a further opportunity to give thanks for the preached Word and to beg healing for the word that harmed, manipulated, or divided.

6. **The Place of Funerals**

Remembering the deceased best takes place in the center front of the church where coffins were shrouded for funeral Masses. The registers of interments, vesture, funeral palls, incense pots, and vessels for holy water should also be employed in the rites. Other suggestions include: a series of Masses for those buried from the parish, memorial prayer cards, or even a stone marker in the nearby Catholic cemetery.

7. **Baptismal Font**

A closing blessing of the assembly from the baptismal font and a song of praise, most especially in a singing once again of the Litany of the Saints, attends to another level of a parish’s identity. One parish sang a litany of the names of all those baptized from the parish’s history. The confessionals, as the place of reconciliation, need to be honored in some way as well. Locating this recognition near the font speaks of baptism and the renewal of baptismal promises.

8. **Lighting**

The church was blessed with a solemn illumination as part of its dedication. Taking leave with only the light of the paschal candle—the other candles in the church having been extinguished in a solemn way—speaks of an accompanying God who walks with the chosen people wherever they go.
9. The Doors

The closing and sealing of the church’s principal doors offers a powerful sense of almost reverent finale. After the 1989 California earthquake, the closing of the Oakland cathedral was conducted on the steps outside the front doors. The declaration of closure by Bishop John Cummins in front of the sealed doors was a powerful ending to the rite. The opening of the door is one of the principal steps of the rites of dedication. It is fitting that the doors figure in the final ritual moment in the closure of a worship site.

10. The Principle Cross

Removing the crucifix can be a special focus of reverence during the final days of a parish’s life. Carrying the principal cross to the receiving parish or to the building of the newly consolidated church is a powerful transitions rite. The fixing of a permanent memorial at some suitable place on a closing building can anchor to memory the once sacred character of the place. A permanent memorial or shrine, even at another locale, could serve as a locus for ongoing grief and the celebration of anniversaries (Weldon, 127–130).

**Diminishment Versus Relinquishment**

At a June 2002 Franciscan convocation Capuchin Fr. David Couturier challenged the friars to struggle against an attitude pervasive in the U.S. church: maintenance. He further called it “diminishment thinking”—that fatalistic, depressing approach to the reconfiguring (my word) of U.S. Catholicism. He noted that it is premised on a “stingy vision of God, a lack of courage, and a failure of creative theological imagination” (Couturier, 8). Priests, religious, and other local lay leadership are left depressed, overworked, and vision challenged. They often function with no image of the future church they are building. To relinquish is a conscious act. It is to give away the treasure of most value and power and to locate oneself under another’s vision. According to Jesuit Tom Sweetser of Milwaukee’s Parish Evaluation Project, to empower another takes much more discipline than the entropy of institutional maintenance (2004).

Relinquishment spirituality (Sweetser calls it a theology) is a requirement for any successful restructure venture at the level of local church. What this requires is that those in authority let go of the controls and share power and decision-making with others. They do this as equals, calling each other to greater maturity, spiritual growth, and accountability through the final moments of a parish’s life. Staff members let go of doing all the planning and deciding by themselves, allowing
as many as possible to share in the future shape of church. Finally, the witness of parishioners letting go—creatively, consciously relinquishing an icon or image of church to take on another—is a window to the paschal mystery. To reframe the boundary of a community’s life to include others is a manifestation of an accompanying God. We need to be attentive or miss the opportunity to witness this new epiphany of Gospel and local church.

References


