Imagining Future Parish Life

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In the midst of significant change in parish structures, demographics, and leadership, the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project studies have discovered an implicit theology of parish deeply rooted in the language of Vatican II that is operative in the U.S. Catholic Church today. How are we to envision the parish of the future?

The Catholic Church in the United States is experiencing a changed and changing pastoral reality. According to the findings of a five-year, nationwide study, the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, the roles of pastoral leaders are evolving, and significant restructuring of parish life is placing new and complex demands on their ministry. How far can and should the church go in implementing new models? Bishops are using canons not needed in the past, installing one pastor in multiple parishes, sometimes stretching the condition that these be neighboring parishes, or installing leadership under canon 517.2. Lay ecclesial ministers and deacons are taking on pastoral work in unprecedented numbers. The demographics of the parish are undergoing significant multicultural change. There is, perhaps, a sense that not only are these models different now, but that they can have unanticipated possibilities for changing the parish as we know it.

To capture an understanding of this changing environment, the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, a five-year research project funded by the Lilly Endowment, asked more than seven hundred lay and ordained leaders to talk about

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parish life, listening deeply to what they said and to the language used to describe their reality. From their sharing, a portrait of an operative theology of the parish began to emerge. Its shape is deeply rooted in the celebration of the Eucharist and has community as a constitutive dimension. This community is understood to be inclusive of all God’s people and to be called, initiated, and sent for mission.

Over and over, in one form or another, pastoral leaders said that spiritually alive parishes are welcoming eucharistic communities. A careful study of their responses indicates the theological texture of their answers. Pastoral leaders express an understanding of parish as an inclusive community of believers rooted in the dynamic mystery of Eucharist, whose members are called by baptism to support one another, be served and animated by designated pastoral leaders, and sent out into the world. The parish of the future, they believe, will be grounded in welcoming and inclusive communities that are mission-focused, with leadership provided by an evolving and interdependent system of lay and ordained leaders, each clearly focused on their role and the mission of the church.

**Theology of Communion and Mission**

When pastoral leaders talk about “community,” they reflect the Vatican II understanding of the church in language that is concrete and pragmatic. They express an understanding of parish as communio, focused on the Eucharist and lived out in discipleship. The parish is seen as the collective responsibility of the faithful in that place. The words of one lay ecclesial minister are representative of many responses:

> The Council of Ministries, the pastor, the professional lay staff, the six commissions and the many ministries are all linked together, each sharing a role in our common mission as church. Through these structures, we call forth and form a community of disciples who then go forth as signs of God’s presence in the world.

[Quotes from pastoral leaders in this article are taken from the results of the Emerging Models surveys and are available at www.emergingmodels.org.]

**Theology of Inclusion**

Participants in the Emerging Models Project spoke of the “welcoming spirit” of the community. Their theology of parish appears to be defined not only by the community that is gathered but also by how the community is gathered, using the language of “inclusion” found in the church’s long tradition. “Welcoming the
“stranger” has become one of the great challenges in today’s church, certainly in the United States. Catholic parishes are called to welcome women and men of different generations and differing ideologies, the poor and outcast, and the differently abled. They are challenged to welcome people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds with their differing spiritual needs. In the words of one parish council member:

[The] challenge is bridging the gap between the sections of the individual congregations; getting the section of parishioners content with celebrating the Eucharist to “transform” and become truly active members living out Christ’s mission of loving one another in all that we do. Reaching out to the Hispanic community and truly welcoming them to be an integral part of the whole community.

Deciding who will be included or excluded has long been a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Radical inclusion surely marks Jesus’ life and ministry. The inaugural activity of the church at Pentecost, found in Luke/Acts, was the proclamation of the Good News to people of many nationalities. The first council dealt with this very difficult question. And it continues today. In 1992 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote in a letter to bishops:

[O]ne’s belonging to a particular Church never conflicts with the reality that in the church no-one is a stranger: each member of the faithful, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, is in his or her Church, in the Church of Christ, regardless of whether or not he or she belongs, according to canon law, to the diocese, parish or other particular community where the celebration takes place [emphasis in original]. (no. 10)

A Sacramental People

What the Emerging Models Project encountered everywhere, spontaneously and unscripted, is the depth of the identity of pastoral leaders as a sacramental people. This identity pervades our imagination, our speech, our interpretation and understanding of parish life and leadership. In order to express a full and robust ecclesiology of parish, the centrality of the Eucharist must be constitutive. The personal call to holiness, begun in our initiation into the Body of Christ, moves to the call to communion, the passing from baptism to Eucharist (Cupich, 8).

In this country, however, access to Eucharist is ebbing. How can we be a eucharistic people if we can only celebrate the Eucharist once a month? Pastoral leaders are very clear. They do not want to lose access to the Eucharist, and they want it presided over by the ordained. Although they have a sense they are being invited
into a larger understanding of what it means to be a eucharistic people, their feelings are echoed in the words of theologian Patricia Fox. Where “these communities . . . [are] being denied the possibility of celebrating Eucharist, [they] are also being denied the possibility of becoming the Body of Christ, of literally being Church” (Fox, 84).

**Evolving Roles of Parish Pastoral Leaders**

In developing the Emerging Models studies, the decision was made to focus on leadership as a system of relationships though which the community is led, rather than on the leader as a single person. When viewed through this lens, what was discovered is a blossoming of pastoral leadership roles that work together to stimulate vibrant and spiritually alive parish communities. These emerging models have a comprehensive understanding of a “total ministering community” involving parishioners, staff, and pastor, working together to achieve a comprehensive vision of the parish of the future. To name a theology of parish in terms of active relationships is to root it in an image of the Trinity, as did this pastoral leader:

Our best model for a total ministering community is the Trinity. Right relationships among all who lead—to respect and trust the gifts each brings—to celebrate that and to strive for its application in service to the parish, the larger church, and the community.

Pope Benedict XVI referred to this growing understanding of the role of the entire community in leadership when he told a group of Italian priests that the church is being called to co-responsibility: “I believe that this is one of the important and positive results of the Council: the co-responsibility of the entire parish, for the parish priest is no longer the only one to animate everything” (190).

**Leadership of the Faithful**

To understand this emerging theology of parish, we cannot continue to look at a personnel-driven model of church, starting with the pastor, although his role is constitutive, nor on how the pastor and staff serve the parish. The mission of the church, the role of the community of disciples, must be the starting point and central focus, with the evolving roles of staff and pastor understood in relationship to it. This emphasis was so central to the Project findings that it was included as one of the twelve best practices for parish leaders: “Emergence of a total ministering community with a growing recognition and appreciation of a
common baptismal call to discipleship with different expressions among clergy, non-ordained professionals, and lay leaders working together in building the spiritual vitality of parish life” (Jewell and Ramey). Parishioners are beginning to stand with pastor and staff as they serve the world together rather than expecting to be served. They are very clear about their role, as was this parishioner:

I think we can expect a greater participation in leadership from the laity and should be preparing them and the community at large for the possibilities. Our church will survive and it will change. The greatest thing we can do is keep reminding people that change is inevitable and pray as a community that the Spirit will guide the parish and inspire and call leaders.

As far back as the early church the assumption has been that “all believers would participate in the building up of the community and its mission to the world” (Gaillardetz, 29). The parish and the apostolate of the pastor require the involvement of the laity in full communion, for the parish “offers an outstanding example of community apostolate, for it gathers all the human diversities that are found there and inserts them into the universality of the Church” (Apostolicam Actositatem, no. 10).

Based on the theology of Vatican II, the ecclesiology used in the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law reflects a specific understanding of the role of each of the baptized in the community, stating that the clergy and the laity have interdependent roles in maintaining the church (Kaslyn, 254).

**Leadership of Parish Staff**

In today’s parishes, pastoral staffs, both lay and ordained, provide most of the on-site, day-to-day pastoral ministry and parish programming, calling forth the gifts of parishioners to participate in the life of the parish. The U.S. bishops stated in Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord that “all the baptized are called to work toward the transformation of the world. Some do this by working in the secular realm; some do this by working in the church and focusing on the building of ecclesial communities, which has among its purposes the transformation of the world” (8). The document continues: “An ecclesiology of communion looks upon different gifts and functions not as adversarial but as enriching and complementary. It appreciates the Church’s unity as an expression of the mutual and reciprocal gifts brought into harmony by the Holy Spirit” (20).

Certainly an emerging trend in the church is the growing number of lay ecclesial ministers and deacons in parish ministry. In practice, lay ecclesial ministers honor the statement in Co-Workers that they “are to use their gifts and leadership always for the good of the Church, equipping the community for every good work and
strengthening it for its mission in the world” (Co-Workers, 26). Deacons, though usually assigned rather than employed, have a place in the word, worship, and service dimensions of the parish, as stated in the National Directory on the Diaconate.

**Leadership of the Pastor**

As participants answered the questions that addressed the leadership of pastors, it became clear that they were using very different language, both theologically and practically, than they used in their description of the leadership role of staff. Their responses focused on the facilitation role of the pastor. One pastor expressed the thoughts of both lay and ordained leaders, “The pastor sets a vision for the parish. He works in collaboration with the staff. He recognizes and affirms the gifts in the parish. He calls forth gifts and leadership from the parish.” Whether overseeing the life of the parish, the staff, the council, the vision, or the parishioners, this role is named in the responses of both lay and ordained pastoral leaders.

What becomes evident is that it is the life of the community that the pastor facilitates. It is the pastor who holds the vision of what the parish is and can be, and how ministry and relationships exist in that community. It is the pastor who is the gatekeeper of change. To the pastor is given the call of ‘presidency,’ the call to preside over the life of the community. They are doing the work called for by John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*:

> [B]ecause their role and task within the Church do not replace but promote the baptismal priesthood of the entire People of God, leading it to its full ecclesial realization, priests have a positive and helping relationship to the laity. . . . They recognize and uphold, as brothers [sic] and friends, the dignity of the laity as children of God and help them to exercise fully their specific role in the overall context of the Church’s mission. (no. 17)

**Parish Life Coordinators**

One of the emerging trends over the past twenty-five years is the growing number of parishes that do not have a resident pastor, more than three thousand in 2008. While there are several options for providing pastoring for these parishes, including the assignment of more than one parish to a single pastor, or importing international priests, one possibility is suggested by canon 517.2, which allows the local bishop to appoint a deacon, religious, or layperson to share in the exercise of the pastoral care of the parish.
The Emerging Models Project conducted the first extensive quantitative study of leadership under canon 517.2. In use for over twenty years in this country, parish life coordinators (PLCs), one of more than thirty titles for this position, were originally all women religious. Today the majority (40 percent) continue to be women religious, with another 25 percent being deacons, and a little more than 25 percent lay men and women. The parish life coordinator is responsible for the pastoral life of the parish and its administrative functioning. Under this canon, the PLC is supervised by a priest moderator and collaborates with one or more priests who serve as sacramental ministers.

When described in relational terms, parish life coordinators perform the role of pastoring in all but sacramental ministry. Canonist James A. Coriden points out the importance of such a role. “‘Partial’ [pastoral care] does not imply a small or minor participation, nor does it imply that the sharing is temporary or an emergency situation. Indeed, a partial sharing can be the major share, all except the sacramental roles reserved to priests as well as the homiletic role that is part of the liturgy itself (c. 767.1)” (Coriden, 469). PLCs love their ministry and, like many pastors, prefer the pastoral work to the administrative work.

The findings of the Emerging Models study concluded that the single most important factor in the decision to employ this canon and its subsequent success is the bishop (Gray, 5). Where the bishop formally and ritually installs a PLC, there is a positive impact in all aspects of their ministry over time. So, to better understand how bishops use and understand the theology of canon 517.2, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), at the request of the Emerging Models Project, interviewed more than fifty bishops from across the country in small, regional focus groups (Bendyna).

Overall, bishops expressed gratitude and positive experience with the work of the PLCs in their own dioceses and feel good that the pastoral life of their parishes is being cared for. They are uneasy about having parishes that do not have a resident ordained pastor and raise questions about authorization, relationship to the diocesan church, and the role of lay ecclesial ministry. They are concerned about their inability to provide a priest pastor for every parish and are concerned that lines of identity and ecclesial roles have become blurred. This concern is voiced in the Vatican’s interdicasterial instruction regarding collaboration of the ordained and non-ordained. Article four addresses the concern that this canon not be employed when clergy, such as retired clergy, are available to pastor or when multiple parishes may be assigned to one pastor (Instruction, art. 41.b). This concern is significant and not easily resolved. However, these options are not always available due to the specific demographic or geographic makeup of the diocese.

The Instruction also indicates a preference for the choice of a deacon where possible. The role of diaconal ordination is a significant consideration for some bishops in terms of authorization and liturgical ministry. They must then address the question of whether or not the deacon is the most competent, qualified, and gifted for
the position since, according to many canonists, this canon assumes competence in providing pastoral care takes priority over ordination (Coriden, 478).

Parishes under the leadership of a PLC exhibit the same emerging theology as parishes under the care of a priest pastor. These communities are welcoming, eucharistic communities. The leadership style and language of many PLCs is collaborative, as they speak of animating the parish community and bringing to life the gifts of parishioners. Their parishes tend to be more culturally diverse than the average parish. They speak of their vocational call as a call to preside over the life of the community, which more closely reflects the call of a pastor than the ministry of parish staff. In the words of one PLC, the parish is the place where “every (or almost every) lay person takes ownership and responsibility for the ongoing development and satisfaction in the faith community.”

The most significant challenge in the use of this canon involves questions regarding the availability of the sacraments. Both lay and ordained PLCs are able, under direction of the bishop, to baptize and to witness marriage, but this does not address the place of Eucharist in the life of the parish. While the study found that the Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest is used far less than was expected, the ecclesiological questions remain. If we do, indeed, see ourselves as a eucharistic people, we do so in the greater understanding that the Eucharist is, as one bishop put it, “not only as banquet but also as sacrifice in making present the paschal mystery” (Bendyna). PLC-led parishes are one of many emerging models of parish. The men and women installed as PLCs under canon 517.2 are bringing life and spiritual vitality to parishes throughout the United States.

Exercising Pastoral Imagination

What is the future of parish life? Participants were asked this question in a series of “futuring” exercises. For one pastor the answer was very clear: “Essentials will be Eucharist, community, mission, non-resident pastors and the role of pastors.” For another pastor: “In the rural areas, it will be a ‘missionary’ model where the priest joins the community for sacraments and the community conducts church in his (or her?) absence.” In areas where there are larger populations, participants saw the future in mega-parishes.

Both lay and ordained believe the future will see far more lay involvement. Leaders were both realistic and hope-filled as they gave their best ideas of where the future of parish life is headed. There is agreement that a significant shift in parish life has begun. There is discouragement where they see leaders clinging to dysfunctional or outmoded leadership styles. But there is strong belief in the future of the parish and the ability of the church to respond to the ministerial and leadership needs of God’s people.
The future of the church remains unknown as it is a part of the mystery of God. According to theologian Richard Lennan, Karl Rahner had come to the conclusion that “experiments in the Church, which became necessary when the old models no longer functioned adequately, had an existential characteristic whose results could not be known in advance. . . . Experiments could, therefore, change the Church.” Lennan explains, Rahner felt that even with this challenge, the need to experiment “was not only consistent with the Church’s existence in a world characterized by planning and futurology, it was also a way of witnessing to faith in the Lord of history who could not be manipulated . . . this willingness to experiment [is] a constitutive element of the Church.” Rahner believed the church needs to ask, “not how far [is] it obliged to go in corresponding to new situations, but how far could it go ‘in exploiting all theological and pastoral possibilities’” (Lennan, 237, 238).

Pastoral leaders are living into the new realities that face them. There is a palpable sense of longing for hope and support. They have a growing understanding—sometimes more accurately described as the barest of glimmers—that the answers will not come from outside of themselves. This change is assuredly led by the Spirit, as pastoral leaders are being called to be more the church of the apostles, not less. As the church moves forward in its mission and ministry, the U.S. bishops describe one challenge in particular that undergirds [the challenges of the future]. It is the need to foster respectful collaboration, leading to mutual support in ministry, between clergy and laity for the sake of Christ’s Church and its mission to the world. This is a huge task requiring changes in patterns of reflection, behavior, and expectation among the clergy and laity alike. (Called and Gifted, 18)

References


