

Parishes Without Parochialism

*Paul Gallagher**

Your Grace, Brother Bishops and Clergy, Esteemed Religious, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am indeed grateful to Archbishop Julian Porteous and the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research for the invitation to attend your conference and have my say! I am told that this conference is basically about statistics. Mark Twain attributes to Benjamin Disraeli the statement: ‘There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics’. Obviously, I can have nothing to do with any of them, so here is the limpid truth.

The parish is, according to Canon 515 §1, ‘a certain community of Christ’s faithful stably established within a particular Church, whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor’. As such, it is one of the most typical institutions of the Christian Church. Wherever the Catholic Church has expanded, parishes have eventually been founded.

Such is the history of the parish that it has passed into common parlance. We used to refer to the destitute as ‘living on the parish’, because, long before the Welfare State, the parish was the basic social unit and safety net. This too was the origin of the still existing Parish Councils, which saw to the implementation of the Poor Law. In the Episcopalian USA, counties are still divided into parishes. In Guatemala, any seminarian I met would always present himself giving his often beautiful but interminable name and parish, so strong was the identification therewith. In many countries of the world the Parish Baptism and Population Registers preceded and were the models for the modern registers of the Civil State.

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The Church in England and Wales, like Australia, was under the jurisdiction of the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* until the restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850. Before that date my Benedictine Parish Church in Liverpool was known as a Mission, and the Priest-in-Charge was the Missionary Rector. Here I have made enquiries and no one can remember the use of such terminology. Perhaps this was another manifestation of the victory of the Irish Clergy over the English Benedictines, of Moran and Mannix over Polding and Vaughan! In Australia it would appear it has always been a matter of parishes and Parish Priests!

In the lives of most Catholics, at least until very recently, the parish has been and remains the fundamental structure and context of their life of faith and social encounter. Whether we be ‘fanatical’, devout, tepid or completely non-practising, the parish is, for better or for worse, the point of reference. Italians have a saying that all the world’s a village – *tutto il mondo è un paese*. Well, in a certain very real sense, all the Church is a parish. We should look on the parish as a fullness, not a reduction or a diminution, of the Church.

The good news is the parish is here to stay! The other news depends on us and the grace of God. Pope Francis is very clear about this, yet quite challenging in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

28. The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters’. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.

This very positive but not uncritical appreciation by the Holy Father presumes certain very basic considerations which I believe constitute a credible apologia for the parish of today and tomorrow.

Perhaps it is a result of my peripatetic life and the fact that I am getting older, but I am more acutely aware than before of the need for belonging, of feeling that you are in a place which has meaning for you and offers you an enriching continuity of human experience.

Linked to this is the potential need for community, felt in different ways by different people, but nonetheless a profoundly human need and reality. Parishes, at their best and even with their limitations, strive to meet these needs at a very basic level, and in many cases they are successful.

To a parish there is normally a territorial dimension. The territory may be modest and urban or vast and rural. It is not insignificant that national personal parishes are in fact transitional, as has been clearly the case in the United States, where it has been seen that social and ecclesial integration renders them eventually unnecessary. Modern transport, communications and rhythms of life and work require that we interpret territoriality dynamically and flexibly. I think we have to be realistic about where people go to Mass, feel they belong and contribute to the community. The parish of today has to be inclusive and welcoming, and resist the temptation of parochialism, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as the 'narrow limitation of perspective or interests'. The parish can work and flourish where there is good will. Where parochialism is the name of the game, then thin sowing will yield a meagre harvest.

There is, of course, another side to the coin. The parish is also a determined entity, and for good reason. There is, for example, a certain bureaucratic necessity for the administration of sacraments to be registered somewhere, in order to overcome the foibles of human memory.

There is also the need for pastoral responsibility to rest somewhere for the faithful who live in a particular place, and their rights to the ministry of the Church, while the clergy need to understand clearly their basic canonical obligations towards those entrusted to them by the Bishop. In a very practical way the buck has to stop somewhere. An over-personalised vision of ministry is surely not in the interests of the majority of Catholics. The family pet-priest who turns out for births, marriages and deaths is a sentimental luxury to which the average family in the pew does not have access. The vision of the Bishop and Parish Priest of today has to be much more all-embracing: he must feel they are all his people and he their father, brother and son. And this is a world where the words 'it is not you who have chosen me, but I who have chosen you' have new meaning. By this I do not intend a paternalistic or patriarchal system or attitudes, but rather an authentically charismatic society in which all have their proper role.

In travelling throughout Australia this last year, I have been astounded at the rich composition of our parishes. Particularly in the urban suburbs, small towns and cities the racial mixture is remarkable. This is indicative that the Church has been quite successful in welcoming and integrating migrants. Although some characteristics of the ghetto are inevitable and will persist, this tends to be a temporary phenomenon. With the passing of the generations and social

advancement, integration will occur naturally. I have the impression that this is more rapid among Christians and Catholics than among other religious groups. While prizing cultural heritage in all its many elements, its conservation must be realistic. It would seem to be unrealistic to believe that the Vietnamese and the Filipinos will buck the trend established by the Italians and Poles. This will mean that in fifty years' time Australian Tagalog and Vietnamese will not be winning prizes.

The rich mixture of cultures and races is at the heart of Catholicism. Diversity is natural to the Catholic, and exaggerated uniformity can stifle the spirit at the heart of our communities. Although it can be helpful and reassuring to encounter things we are familiar with, it can also be enriching to gain insights into other ways of prayer, worship and relating to God. We all tend to take ourselves as the norm, but this is not helpful. We should perhaps be more disposed to be challenged by our community than to be reassured.

Such considerations do not exclude stability, a minimum of which I believe is necessary for normal spiritual development. I am sure that most of you will have direct experience of how difficult it can be to build and strengthen a community, and a community grounded in faith and the Eucharist is no exception. The very effort of so doing is important and not something to be resented or simply tolerated, for building a community is based on the growth of the constitutive elements. The Pauline theology of the body is indispensable here: 'For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body", that would not make it any less a part of the body ... If the whole were an eye, where would be the hearing? ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (1 Cor 12:14 ff.).

If the ecclesial community is usefully to be likened to a healthy living human body, it is certainly not to be considered a business. Although administration needs to be efficient and accountability regular and punctual, I believe it is undesirable that we replicate business models and roles in our parishes and church institutions. The objectives and frequently the values are quite different and often opposed. Jesus' expulsion of the vendors and money-changers from the temple is one of the most vivid episodes of his ministry, and should never be forgotten. The temptation to commercialise religion has always been strong and we should remember that the means too must be morally good if the end is also to be good. As you know, there is much soul-searching in Rome at this time precisely on this point, and I see no reason why we should be exempt from a little ourselves.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis refers to the parish as a 'community of communities'. Now this is a very popular idea in Latin America, and one that he has clearly used before. I tend to reboot it as 'a communion of communities'. Experience of parish life today tends to be an eclectic amalgam of organisations, groups and movements. Here again, just as the Holy Father warns, it is dangerous if one group tends to dominate, to monopolise parish life, to make itself the

normal expression of catholicity in that parish. This requires a great balancing act on the part of the Parish Priest and other ministers, and perhaps a degree of sacrifice when he is personally inspired and sustained by a particular spirituality, but he must not allow that to be an obstacle to communion with others.

If you ask the average Catholic what Vatican II meant for them, they will answer that the Mass changed from Latin into the vernacular. In a way they are right, as that change was the summation and symbol of much of what it is my firm belief the Holy Spirit wished and wishes of his Church. The liturgical reforms formally initiated by the Council were themselves the fruit of the Liturgical Movement, which over many years had been chipping away at the monolith of Catholic worship, which stood in need of renewal. The active participation which was to characterise the renewed liturgy was itself a symbol of an active participation of the baptised in the life of the Church. It is now, to most of us, unimaginable that a parish be governed without the involvement of its members at all levels of its life. The spirit in which this is done is truly Catholic when it is collaborative and gratuitous. We must jealously preserve the loving service which animates the volunteer.

I would make two appeals at this point: first, we need parishes because where would the poor and the miserable go otherwise? I have always considered it one of the signs of the Church's authenticity that the poor come to us, bother us and drive us crazy. So they did to Jesus and his disciples; why not us too? Secondly, we need parishes for the unenthusiastic and the apathetic. I feel quite strongly that we must accept that there are people, good people, who for many reasons will not join anything and who will not volunteer. They want Mass on Sunday and give the impression that they want to be left in peace. This is the Church passive, non-militant, but it is still the Church, and they still have a place. The Church is their home too and they must be made warmly welcome. Perhaps their smouldering faith is waiting for the gentle breeze of the Spirit to burst into flame, but we should be wary of extinguishing the embers with our zealotry.

In the Pontificate of Pope Francis the Church is once again being called to renewal in the Spirit and according to the directives of the Second Vatican Council. Contemporary media of all technologies are allowing the Pope to have a remarkable impact at many levels. I think he is probably a little unmoved by being *Time Magazine's* 'Person of the Year' or by being talked about in the corridors of power in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, Berlin, Paris or even Canberra. However, I am certain he would be happy to know that, because of what he is saying and doing, Catholics—parishioners—all over the world are thinking about what it means to be a Catholic today, to be a member of a parish, to be a local missionary and community builder. John Wesley, the itinerant founder of Methodism, wrote in his Journal: 'I look upon all the world as my parish'. I think Pope Francis does too. We should look upon our parish as the world, a world of immense horizons, which is true to its identity only when it frees itself from the constraining limitations of parochialism.