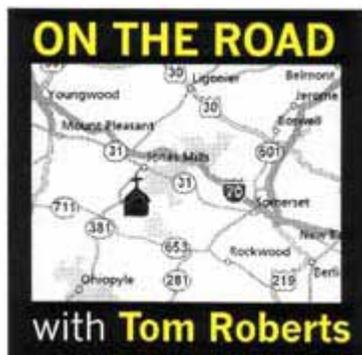


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Cleveland diocese shaken by seismic shifts

by Tom Roberts



Cleveland

When I arrived here April 28, the gloom and anxiety hung thick in the air around some Catholic leaders and groups who were either grieving or making plans to resist the news they had received the preceding month: Of the diocese's 224 parishes, 29 would close, 41 would merge, meaning the diocese would end up with 18 new parishes and a net loss of 52.

The situation in Cleveland is one of the latest indications of the seismic shifts in demographics, structure, ministry and other fundamental elements rattling the Catholic church in the United States. The forces moving the plates beneath the surface of the Catholic landscape are many, some well known and obvious, some unseen and mysterious.

Cleveland is the first of several stops in the Eastern United States over the next few weeks during which I'll be looking at what is unfolding on the ground and what may be shaping the future of the U.S. Catholic community. In coming months, we'll look at other areas of the country where the church developed much differently than it did in the traditionally muscular sees in the Northeast. In those places, the church grew up with different expectations, fewer priests and a longer legacy of having to improvise.

The news here came in the form of an announcement by Bishop Richard Lennon, who was appointed in 2006 to succeed Bishop Anthony Pilla and had consequently walked into the thankless job of overseeing a diocese that was midstream in a reorganization project that had been in the works for years. To many, Lennon, who already had a reputation for an unyielding approach to closing parishes in Boston, was an outsider, someone who couldn't possibly understand in a short time the complexity of the city of Cleveland nor how tightly some parishes were woven into its social fabric.

When dioceses downsize and parishes are closed, members often compare the feeling to the loss of a loved one. It is difficult to overstate the connections -- emotional, historic, spiritual, ethnic -- that people can have for their parishes, particularly inner city churches that grew at great cost out of an earlier immigrant period.

A Friday surprise

By the time I left May 3, some of the gloom had lifted. Lennon had unexpectedly reversed his decisions to close two churches -- St. Colman and St. Ignatius -- which had clearly become two of the most contentious flashpoints. The move poked a few holes in theories that I had heard articulated consistently in interviews over five days with dozens of Cleveland Catholics, including parishioners, pastors, parish life coordinators, diocesan employees and people who had been deeply involved in the diocesan Vital Parishes initiative that had led to Lennon's initial decisions.

The theories went something like: Lennon will never change his mind (indeed, the original appeals of St. Colman and St. Ignatius had been denied); Lennon is closing those churches because they have strong, independent pastors; Lennon wants to use the churches he's closing as ATMs, to sell the properties to raise money for the diocese; Lennon has no regard for what those parishes mean in terms of social outreach and connection to the poor in those areas.



Whatever truth resides in those assessments, it is certainly clear that

Lennon is a different personality from Pilla, who is said to have asked more than once when the topic of closing a parish came up: "How will we be a better church if we close it?" A wide consensus among those I spoke with was that Pilla, who had his own trouble with a financial scandal at the end of his tenure (the details of which were exhaustively reported in the pages of *NCR*) would have allowed some of the parishes "to die a natural death." It was also roundly held that he would not have gone after such places as St. Colman and St. Ignatius. People also believe he would have spared St. Peter Church, another Cleveland parish known for innovative liturgy and extensive outreach, that is now scheduled to be closed.

Pilla is widely viewed as having a more pastoral approach, meaning he appeared friendlier and more apt to listen to both discussion and criticism.

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"I have to give him [Lennon] credit," said one woman who asked to speak anonymously because her parish is still involved in appealing a closing order. "I never thought he'd do something like this, but what he did was good. It was good for the city and for the church."

With the decisions reversed, speculation turned to "Why?"

Lennon, who declined requests for an interview for this article, gives some of the reasons in his letter to St. Colman announcing the reprieve. "After much continuing prayer and discernment during the period of parish appeals, I have now come to believe that the needs of the church and our Catholic community may be better served with both St. Colman and St. Stephen continuing as parishes. "

The reprieve comes with conditions and the parish, said its pastor, Fr. Robert Begin, has been placed on a four year clock to end a trend of deficit spending and complete needed capital repairs; to continue growing "in households and in Mass attendance"; to strengthen parish finances and to establish "emergency reserves and building preservation reserves"; and to "remain dedicated to its outreach ministries while becoming a more financially viable parish."

In the letter the bishop admitted that he had come to "a more complete understanding of the extent of the social and community services at the parish and the outreach to diverse neighborhoods as well as the connection of these ministries with the Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy" than he had when he made the original decision.

He also said he has a "better understanding of the importance of the Lorain Avenue corridor and its demographics for the work of the church." Both St. Colman and St. Ignatius are historic fixtures along that corridor.

Finally, he noted that the parish finances, on further review, "are better than originally perceived although still quite challenged."

If, indeed, the loss of a parish is viewed as the loss of a family member, this was a commuted death sentence. In his remarks to the parish at the Saturday afternoon liturgy, the day after the reprieve was announced, Begin said "we get to keep our home, we get to keep our family."

Some bottom lines

It is fair to say that there are some base lines that define the situation in Cleveland. No one I spoke to said the status quo would have served the church well going into the future. From the most ardent opponents of the bishop's decisions to those who agree with the inevitability of closings, the common ground it was that something had to be done. If the positions were placed on a spectrum, on one end would be the few who simply say some in the church "have moved beyond" the need for current structures and "a priest in every parish" rule. In their scheme, the church should support more independent communities that would not necessarily have need of an edifice. On the other end of the spectrum would be those who, I was told, expressed relief that the process had provided a way to an end -- closing a parish -- that no one wanted to initiate on their own. Often such relief was expressed by those in small ethnic parishes that had reached a natural end to their existence.

Another base line involves numbers. The process used to determine which parishes were closed was

designed to be highly consultative -- and in many places the consultation worked well. It involved 69 clusters of parishes over the entire range of the diocese, the 17th largest in the country with 753,255 Catholics spread over 4,414 square miles, eight counties and several urban areas including Cleveland and Akron.

Of those 69 clusters (I heard of some with as few as three parishes, others with as many as seven), 27 were given a mandate to close or merge a certain number of parishes. Of those 27, according to people deeply involved in the process, about seven became fairly contentious. In most of those instances, the opposition to the bishop's decision arose because he reversed the recommendations that resulted from a decision-making process that lasted for some 17 months and included deliberations by the diocesan planning office and the presbyteral council.

So the shock of the closings in those cases -- the original decisions to close St. Colman and St. Ignatius were among those that contradicted the recommendations -- was exacerbated by the feeling of many that they had gone through an arduous and extensive process of discussion and discernment, designed by the diocese, for no reason.

What effect the unexpected reprieves will have on people's perception of the bishop or on several appeals other parishes are preparing for the judicial process in Rome remains to be seen.

No new models here

Unknown also is the long-term effect of the reorganization of the diocese. Ten years from now, if the numbers of priests and nuns keep falling as is expected, will yet another reorganization be in order? Is it inevitable that the diocese, somewhere down the line, will have to look to some of the new models of organization that are in place elsewhere?

Still relatively out of the limelight nationally is all of the work -- the gathering of both data and experience -- regarding new models of pastoral leadership and parish organization that are occurring across the country.

Diocesan planners and others in Cleveland say the direction seems clear here -- Lennon wants every parish to have a resident priest, so sharing a priest/pastor or use of Pastoral Life Coordinators, nuns or non-vowed lay people given responsibility for a parish under commission by the bishop, apparently are not options at this point.

Whatever the case -- trying to maintain the traditional structure at the cost of existing communities or experimenting with new models at the expense of traditional structures -- old presumptions about parish life and ministry are being jostled.



Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, is traveling the country reporting on parish life. He is on the first of several trips he plans to take, this time moving through Ohio, eastward into New Jersey and on to the nation's capital. His e-mail address is troberts@nronline.org. Read the full series here: **In Search of the Emerging Church**.

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