NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Rust Belt reality

Tom Roberts | May. 7, 2009

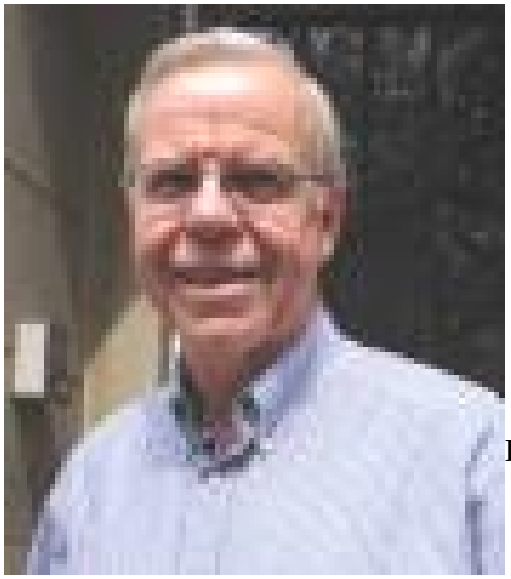
2nd in the series

LORAIN, OHIO -- Sitting around the kitchen table in the rectory of St. Mary Church in Lorain with Pat Shullick, pastoral life coordinator, pastor Fr. Dan Divis and janitor Don Ward (while working on a bowl of remarkable lentil soup accompanied by a plate of Italian sausage and focaccia), I hear the story of a young priest who wanted to go anywhere but Lorain. This is a town as dated as the Billy Joel lyrics -- and they have closed all the factories down. The steel plants are long gone, so are all the small machine shops and the like that lived off work from the steel mills. Ward tells of recalling as a youngster his first sight of Lorain. The sky, he said, was red with the flames from the steel plants. His father had moved the family here from the coal fields of West Virginia and Ward has followed in his footsteps, until it all disappeared.

Divis, who wanted nothing to do with Lorain, was of course transferred there and in the 22 years since, the last 17 as pastor, he has grown to love the place. He now considers this both -- these words again -- home and family. Shullick has been involved with the parish even longer, 26 years. She's performed a host of ministries, has become educated theologically, and is now a pastoral associate with a great deal of responsibility for education and programming at the parish.

It's a busy, blue-collar parish with a healthy enrollment (about 1100 families registered and 600 a week showing up for Mass) and slowly climbing out of debt accrued before the parish school was closed five years ago.

Neither pastor nor associate will go into detail, but it is clear that their cluster process has not gone well. They were told to merge with another congregation, but exactly how it will happen and at which site the new church will be located is still up in the air. An appeal by some parishioners is in the works. Divis wants to stay in Lorain, but will have to reapply for the spot, and Shullick has no idea what will happen to the staff and all that has been built in the last two decades.



Down the road about 10 minutes at St. Agnes Church in Elyria, the pastor, Fr. Albert Krupp, had a far different story and one that demonstrates how often the devil, or perhaps the angels, are in the details. To the first time observer there is no great distinction between Elyria and Lorain. Krupp describes his region, as did Divis, as old, poor and rust belt. Both have seen precipitous population declines in recent years. People here used to work in the steel mills just minutes away, but even back then, he said, Elyria was like a walled off city, very distant in many ways from Lorain.

So he attributes some of the success of the cluster process here to the fact that "we had only each other." It probably helps, too, that Krupp seems to be someone who defines the best of the priesthood. He was regularly high on everyone's list of whom to talk to and consistently spoken of as smart, compassionate and embodying integrity.

He smiled and waved off the compliments.

What really counted, he said, is that his cluster of five parishes, charged with cutting the number to three, had a superb facilitator who communicated constantly with all parties involved, even between meetings, and who also prepared extensively each step of the way.

So this fairly closed group from parishes that already had worked together extensively on some projects and liturgical matters, ultimately came to a consensus that was accepted by the bishop. St. Agnes is one of the churches that will stay open.

He knows the process was uneven throughout the diocese, that decisions that ran contrary to the cluster recommendations caused problems. Most contentious were decisions handed out without any convincing rationale.

Community will be essential

I asked him what he sees in the future for the church in the United States.

Krupp is nearly 70, and he didn't speak of a future full of new priests or reorganized parishes. Instead, he said, "the future of the church is experiential and relational."

"The most fundamental Catholic thing is community," he said. "That doesn't just mean a conglomeration of people or all notionally assenting to the same truths." It means, rather, "an experience of bondedness and connectedness. That's why small faith communities in parishes are so successful."

He thinks "there's a lot of leaven in the bread," a lot going on in the church of today guiding people toward a future where community based on a shared faith is a central reality of Catholic life.

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@ncronline.org. Read the full series here: **In Search of the Emerging Church** [1].

Follow Tom Roberts on his journey "In Search of the Emerging Church." Sign up to **receive an e-mail alert** [2] when his stories are posted to this series. If you already receive e-mail alerts from NCR, click on the button that says "update my profile."

Source URL (retrieved on *08/01/2014 - 06:06*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/rust-belt-reality

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/in-search-of-the-emerging-church
[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup