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Intentional Eucharistic Communities

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One reality of Catholic life that surfaced time and again during my recent travels is the fact that it is constantly subject to immediate and arbitrary forces over which people in the pews have little or no control. People who have invested years in developing parish programs, trained ministers who have devoted decades of their professional lives to building ministries, parishioners who have supported a parish and grown deeply attached to a parochial community are increasingly aware that everything is one new pastor or new bishop away from changing or ending.

All of it ? and that can even mean the traditional Latin Mass chapel or the conservative movement ? exists at the pleasure of either the bishop or the pastor and the new guy, in either case, can upend everything without notice or concern for what?s gone before.

Sometimes? it?s a wonder anyone stays. Some don?t.

Some find refuge and continuity in what are being called Intentional Eucharistic Communities.

What are they?

It?s tough to come up with a comprehensive definition, but I?ll be trying to give a clearer picture of who and what they are and the tensions involved in sustaining them in coverage that will appear in an upcoming issue of NCR.

I spent some time at a recent gathering of these communities in a 4H Center in Chevy Chase, MD., which gives some indication that they exist, at least at the moment, in territory that is somewhat off the institutional territory.

More than 230 people representing at least 42 such communities from 17 states attended the weekend of talks and discussions over just what they are and where they're headed.

The communities come in a wide variety of shapes and forms and in widely varying degrees of attachment to the larger institutional church. Some were born decades ago out of small communities within parishes. Some resulted from what I'll dub the "had it" syndrome? they finally "had it" when the last priest change fairly destroyed all the characteristics of a beloved community. Some formed more recently around concerns for social justice or a more inclusive liturgy or in reaction to larger changes within a diocese.

This brand of church may not be to everyone's liking, but I found that the communities and the thinkers and commentators they brought in for the weekend are raising fascinating questions that will certainly be part of the Catholic conversation in the years ahead.

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