

Parish mergers: So tough to balance resources and personnel

Richard McBrien | Mar. 21, 2011 Essays in Theology

Many years ago priests sometimes gave voice to a gallows-humor sort of comment, "Last one out blow out the sanctuary lamp."

When they made this remark, there were rectories with four priests and five well-attended Masses on Sunday, on the hour from 7 until 11. Some pastors were so worried about clearing the parking lot for the next Mass that they began distributing Communion right after the Consecration.

Little did they (or any of us) know that the Catholic Church would come upon such hard times in the late 20th century and the early 21st.

Could we have expected long established parishes merging with one or two others? Could we have expected that some parishes would close entirely, and that there would be sit-ins of parishioners protesting the closures?

The Archdiocese of Boston recently announced the launching of a major effort to reorganize its parish structures in response to three challenges: declining Mass attendance, diminished financial resources, and a shortage of priests.

According to an article by Lisa Wangsness, religion writer for *The Boston Globe* ("Diocese takes steps to retool parishes," 2/3/11), Mass attendance in the archdiocese has fallen from 70 percent in the heyday of Catholic practice to 20 percent today. She cites Fr. Richard Erikson, vicar general of the archdiocese, as her source.

Forty percent of the 291 parishes in the archdiocese are expected to finish this year in the red, and the number of active diocesan priests is expected to drop from about 350 this year to just 180 a decade from now.

As a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Hartford, I was sent to study for the priesthood in Boston, at St. John's Seminary in the Brighton section of the city.

I can recall while there, either in the late 1950s or very early in the 1960s, when, at an ordination ceremony, Cardinal Richard J. Cushing, then Archbishop of Boston, complained from the cathedral pulpit (the other ordination was being conducted by one of his auxiliary bishops in the West Roxbury section of Boston) that the archdiocese was ordaining "only" 65 priests that year. He had expected and hoped for 100!

How times and circumstances have changed! Boston is lucky to have five men ordained for service in the archdiocese.

In 2004 the new Archbishop of Boston, now-Cardinal Sean O'Malley, realized that he had to do something to address these three challenges. Upon the recommendation of a commission that he had established, parishes were closed and parishioners of the closed parishes were sent to another nearby parish. This led to much controversy, and in some cases sit-ins and appeals to Rome.

Today adjustments have been made. Instead of closing parishes, the idea is to reorganize parish structures. Neighboring parishes would be merged into a single parish, but Mass would continue to be celebrated in multiple churches.

Each clustered parish would be run by a single pastor, with help from a team of priests as well as a consolidated parish council, finance council, and parish staff.

Some dioceses still use the now-discarded plan of Boston. For example, three parishes in the Dorchester section of the city were merged, but they retained their own parish councils and finance councils. The pastor of these three merged parishes had to attend all the meetings.

This is the case in many dioceses today. Priests who serve as pastors of merged parishes are burning out before their parishioners', families', and friends' eyes.

The proposed plan for the restructuring of parishes in the Archdiocese of Boston is certainly better than the path that other dioceses are still following. But it remains to be seen how the new Boston plan works out. Certainly the earlier plan did not.

Individuals can cite parish churches (especially in Florida) that are overflowing. But the national trend is similar to Boston's, the recent CARA study notwithstanding.

There is a dramatic fall-off in priestly vocations. Many parishes have severe financial difficulties. And there has been a sharp decline in Mass attendance nationwide. These are realities which cannot be denied or ignored.

In the meantime, the church cries out for effective leadership -- bishops chosen not for their conservative credentials and loyalty to the Holy See, but for their pastoral aptitude and credibility.

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