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

In Canada, rethinking the parish model

Isabella R. Moyer | May. 23, 2013 NCR Today

In ?Rethinking the parish concept [1]? Michael Swan of The Catholic Register, Canada?s oldest Catholic weekly, explores some of the risky and hard questions facing many parishes in North America and Europe.

Msgr. Roch Pagé is the judicial vicar of the Canadian Appeal Tribunal. He believes that the ideals and reality of parish life have diverged: ?We fake it, I?m sorry to say. We fake that the parish is a community. Increasingly, people do not know each other. It?s not because we call it a community that it is a community,? he is quoted saying in the article.

Swan goes on to highlight Pagé?s presentation in October at the Canon Law Society of America?s annual conference, where the monsignor described the parish as an ?excellent means to localize the Church,? but it remains a means. And, ?as a means, it should not be confused with its final goal.? A parish can disappear, but the community as the body of Christ can remain.

?We have to renew with the origins,? he said. ?We have to make a new link with the beginning of the Church.?

Pagé is not simply predicting a possible future demise of parishes. Priest shortages and shrinking congregations are already forcing parish restructuring and reorganizing in North America and Europe.

Bishop Luc Bouchard of Trois-Riviéres, Québec, referenced Pagé?s paper for the Canon Law Society of America in a recent pastoral letter. Of the 33 active priests in Bouchard?s diocese, only eight are under the age of 70 years old. Most are responsible for several churches spread out over many miles. He ponders, ?What does the future hold? Will there still be parishes as we have known them? Will there still be priests? Who will be the leaders of tomorrow??

Bouchard, Swan reports, is also concerned about the heavy burden of real estate management placed on fewer and fewer aging parishioners:

> ?Maybe we can still be a community without necessarily identifying ourselves with a building. The Church is identified first of all by the love of one another, as Christ taught us,? Bouchard said. ?The challenge is to shift, I would say, from being a parish community to being a Catholic community ? When Christianity began, Christians didn?t identify themselves with a building but rather by the way that they lived.?

Connie Paré, director of pastoral planning services in the diocese of London, Ontario is realistic about the issues faced in rethinking the parish concept.

?The parish model is the source of revenue and it?s also where Eucharist is celebrated. When proposing other models, or even investigating them, well ? how do we tend to these pieces?? she told the *Register*. ?Especially the Eucharist piece. Virtual doesn?t work. In the sense of a real, living, organic community, how do you maintain that and still connect with people differently? Those are risky questions.?

There is hope in this article. Reality often leaves us no choice but to face the risky and challenging questions. We can succumb to a defeatist attitude and bemoan the loss of what we had. Or, we can tap into the courage of those who aren?t afraid to read the signs of the times and search together for new ways of being Church.

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[1] http://www.catholicregister.org/component/k2/item/16353-rethinking-the-parish-concept