

Parochial Solipsism

It is not excessive to suggest that three quarters of the life of the American pastor is consumed with administrative governance. He is, for all intents and purposes, the head of a small business. He hires and fires, reviews budgets, maintains buildings, and attends to the countless bureaucratic details that daily come across his desk. As if this administration were not enough, his life is then pressurized by the infinite demands of the pastorate. Instead of leaving the office after eight hours and returning home to his wife and kids, he begins an evening shift of pastoral appointments, council meetings and parish programming. And even if the night passes without an emergency call, he still has the morning sacramental routine before hitting the office and starting all over again.

With a life like this, it is not surprising that *priests are being dissolved into their parishes*. Hard working, well-intentioned men, seeking nothing more than to serve Christ and his flock, are ending up in a lifestyle that is nothing short of dehumanizing. With each passing year, younger and younger priests assume larger and larger parishes, often with no business training or facility for administration. It is no wonder then that even the most basic role of pastor is becoming an increasingly colossal feat.

In such a critical moment for the American priesthood, the last thing that is needed is the status quo of the company line. Sober and thoughtful reflection on the lived experience of the diocesan priest has never been more urgent. The decadent functionalism of the past must give way to a renewed vision of priestly life, one drawn exclusively from the tradition. Here we can begin again with the most patently obvious fact of Christian discipleship - *they are never sent out one by one*. For some reason we are slow to acknowledge that maybe this should also apply to diocesan priests. The response to every clerical scandal in the history of the Church has some way involved the rebuilding of priestly fraternity. Holiness of life, the only true response to crisis, is always a project of communion. Likewise in our day, if we want to rebuild priests, we have to rebuild their fraternity.

The following is not an argument for the remedial character of priestly fraternity - it presupposes it. It likewise does not aim to convince of the necessity of fraternity - this should be entirely self-evident. What it does attempt is a work of excavation, of getting down into the substructures and assessing the foundations upon which fraternity can be build. Faulty foundations lead to inevitable collapse. Every attempt at authentic fraternity, built upon unstable foundations, is destined to fail.

Our contemporary parish governance is an example of a foundational problem for priestly fraternity. Left to the circumstances in which they find themselves, priests are destined to lose one another, fated to the presbyteral archipelago. Even more concerning, this reality is espousing in priests what can be called *parochial solipsism* - a fierce adversary to the life of fraternity. It is this phenomenon that not only reveals cracks in a priest's existential

foundations, but a force that is compounding it all the more. It is a phenomenon that must be brought to light, if true priestly fraternity is ever going to take root and flourish.

From the latin words *solus* ("alone") and *ipse* ("self"), solipsism is the philosophical theory that nothing can be known apart from oneself. Analogously applied, parochial solipsism describes what happens *when a priest can know nothing but his parish*. Parochial solipsism siloes a priest in his Church, rendering him incapable of thinking outside its boundaries. He stops taking vacation and days off, avoids diocesan commitments and disappears off the fraternal radar. He can't leave the parish because "my people need me." Now an ecclesial island, he espouses a kind of pastoral isolationism which breaks down presbyteral or diocesan communion. Parochial solipsism, a phenomenon even more pronounced with the younger generation, not only disrupts the essential order of the local church - it eclipses the very possibility of fraternity.

The present article will explore the phenomenon of *parochial solipsism* in three ways. First, in a study of its origins, we discover a misunderstanding of the notion of sacrifice, the false equivocation of *munera* and *charism*, and a pattern of co-dependency between parish and priest. Second, in reviewing new contributing factors to parochial solipsism, we see how sociological, demographic and cultural changes are transforming the parish and intensifying the phenomenon. Lastly we will begin excavating, arguing that only by re-entrusting the parish's material governance to the diaconate can priests be sufficiently free to rebuild their fraternal life together.

I. The Origins of Parochial Solipsism

1. *The first origin of parochial solipsism is the misunderstanding of Christian sacrifice.*

At first glance, priests should be dissolved in their parishes. As consecrated men, they are destined not for the glories of eternal bachelorhood but for the holocaust of self - the true love in imitation of the bridegroom of the Church. As John Paul II reminded us, the essential content of pastoral charity is "the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church."¹ What then is more edifying and inspiring in the life of a priest than this reality lived out with evangelical radicality? Furthermore, the inner logic of the priest's self-gift, in its normative parish expression, is best revealed in his limitations. When the priest can no longer rely on his giftedness, he becomes a true witness of the power of Christ crucified. The nobility of this priestly call, of this distinctively christological form of self-gift, is at the heart of parish and paternal fruitfulness.

But parochial solipsism is a counterfeit of this vision of self-gift. Strangely, it resembles Hegel's vision of self-gift, a total annihilation: "Love consists in giving up one's personality, all that is his own [...] It is the supreme surrender in the other."² When tradition speaks of the Christian's

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 23.

² G.W.F. HEGEL, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, III, 125.

holocaust of love, it communicates something entirely different. Here, every surrender of created love enters into the mystery of divine love, which, in the Sacred Humanity of Christ, passed through death and into the conquest of the Resurrection. Like all Christians, the priest who conforms his life to the cross of Christ through the evangelical counsels, truly rediscovers himself in Christ. "Whoever loses himself for my sake, finds himself" (Matt. 16:25). Hegel may agree with the first part, but certainly not the second.

This Christian vision of sacrifice leads to a most foundational point: *Jesus Christ (and not the priest) is the pastor of the parish*. He alone is the good shepherd, who "lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Though the priest knows he merely participates in Christ's pastorate, the mentality of parochial solipsism makes this awareness harder and harder to live. If he is to be free of the illusions of personality cult and savior complex, the pastor must daily recall that through his office of priestly representation, what truly matters is not *his* self-gift - but that of Jesus Christ.

2. *The second origin of parochial solipsism is the false equation of the munera of governance and the charism of administration.*

The ministerial priesthood, which differs in essence from the priesthood of the laity, is exercised through three *munera*.³ One of these is the *munus regendi*, or pastoral governance, which is not primarily bureaucratic but "aimed at fostering communion and mission."⁴ Standing *in persona Christi Capitis*, the priest exercises this *munus* principally that the community may be spiritually formed into the one family of God.⁵ Pastoral governance is much more profound and mysterious than just "the business side of the parish."

Furthermore, the *munus regendi* differs from the *charism* of administration, of which St. Paul speaks in the First Letter to the Corinthians. This gift of *kybernēsis*, listed with apostles, prophets, teachers and others, is "appointed" for the upbuilding of the body of Christ, and not essentially connected to Holy Orders (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28). In other words, this gift of organizing and ruling the people of God need not be clerical; it is a gift probably latent in the lay faithful of the parish. Etymologically, administration is nothing more than *ad-minstrare*, "towards service." In the parish, pastoral governance and the charism of administration are complementary gifts, one official and one charismatic. Just because the priest receives the office of governance does not presuppose (nor negate) the charism of administration. Failure to see this leads to a false appropriation of all temporal concerns to the pastor, destined to the engendering of parochial solipsism.

3. *The third origin of parochial solipsism is the co-dependency of a priest with his parish.*

The third and deepest origin of parochial solipsism is the most insidious - the development of

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1592.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to Bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey* (Vatican City: September 12, 2004).

⁵ cf. G. SCHROFF, *The "Munus Regendi" of the Priest and the Vocation of the Laity*, in "Homiletic and Pastoral Review," 11 Dec 2012.

co-dependent patterns of behavior between the priest and the parish. Broadly considered, a co-dependent priest relies excessively, either emotionally or psychologically, on the parish. Tacitly driving a pseudo-generosity, this co-dependency is as difficult to identify as it is expel. If the priest's needs are never met and the needs of the parish never exhausted, then there is no more likely setting for the development of co-dependency. As parochial solipsism evolves, the priest's relationships become entirely contingent on his pastoral work. The priest then hires his friends as his employees, who with the loss of boundaries, are destined to become a community of codependency.

II. Some Contributing Factors

1. *Sociological Flux and the loss of the Territorial Parish*

Zygmunt Bauman was the first to describe our modern society with the metaphor of "liquidity."⁶ If the permanent feature of modernity is the "melting of solids," then the great philosophical upheaval of the last few centuries has everything to do with the sociological flux we are now experiencing. This loss of solidity is decisively secular, which means that as man becomes increasingly fluid, he is becoming increasingly in flux. Of all our society's impermanence, none is more influential on the life and form of a parish structure than modern mobility. Liquid man, ever inclined to constant change, is now more capable of it than ever before.

The Code of Canon Law describes a parish as "a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church."⁷ It is, as a general rule, a *paroecia territorialis*, or territorial parish.⁸ This means that in its normative expression, a parish is essentially geographical.⁹ For centuries, this was lived out in the stability of agrarian societies. But with the Industrial Revolution and its subsequent urbanization, the territorial dimension of the parish began to change. Now, half a century after the phenomenon of post-war suburbia, full access to modern mobility has almost totally eclipsed the geographical significance of urban parishes. If parish attendance is no longer based on geographic location, nor even on the bonds of community, then it will fall prey to the temptation of parochial consumerism. For many American Catholics, parish life is an entirely transient experience - one ever in search of musical tastes, homiletic talent, or even worse - the sheer force of a priest's personality.

2. *Demographic Change in a Declining Church*

⁶ cf. Z. BAUMEN, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, 1.

⁷ CODE OF CANON LAW, n. 515.

⁸ "As a general rule a parish is to be territorial, that is, one which includes all the Christian faithful of a certain territory." CODE OF CANON LAW, n. 518.

⁹ Canon Law does afford the existence of "personal parishes" (*Paroeciae personales*), but these are not in anyway connected to the personality of the pastor: "When it is expedient, however, personal parishes are to be established determined by reason of the rite, language, or nationality of the Christian faithful of some territory, or even for some other reason." CODE OF CANON LAW, n. 518.

Eight years ago, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate published a study entitled *The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes*. The study showed that the average American pastor manages a staff of 9.5 lay people and an annual operating budget of \$626,500 (30% of which are operating in deficit). But what is more important is the changing size of the parish. In 2010, the average American parish had 3,277 individual registered parishioners.¹⁰ Since the year 2000, this number had increased by 45%.¹¹ This astounding, nearly exponential rate of growth, is undoubtedly changing not only the face of the parish, but the life of the priest.

Then again, Catholics are not being increased, just redistributed. The primary reason for this massive increase is the consolidation of parishes - the bane of the modern episcopacy. We have yet to feel the seismic demographic decline which is coming with the passing of the baby boomer generation. This pivot point will necessitate one of two things: either our priests will be more deeply coerced into parochial solipsism, or we radically rethink the way priestly ministry is being lived.

3. Post-Conciliar Bureaucratization and the New Challenges of Technocracy.

The implementation of the Second Vatican Council brought about an ecclesial bureaucracy hitherto unknown in the Church. Already in 1970, Louis Bouyer described priests and bishops in the Church as "administrators of a machine whose purpose and workings no one knows."¹² The machine is an empty bureaucracy, one that stifles the life of evangelization. Though it may be helpful or even necessary, it speaks not of the logic of the Gospel but that of the world. Our widespread infatuation with committees and congregations, initiatives and campaigns, are vacuous unless they proceed from the deep interior life of the Church.

Parochial solipsism thrives in ecclesial technocracy. And though every advancement of technology promises to simplify our life, it seems to do nothing but consume it all the more. This is most evident in the area of modern communication, which has rendered the priest more accessible than ever before. Now, in addition to his myriad of other responsibilities, he must battle the hydra of technological communication - which unlike the case of Hercules, is not a battle he is fated to win.

III. Excavating the Grounds: Entrusting Deacons and Living Fraternity

¹⁰ CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE APOSTOLATE, *The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes*, 2010, 1.

¹¹ "U.S. parishes average 3,277 (median of 1,950) individual registered parishioners. In 2000, the average number of registered parishioners was 2,260. This number has risen by 45 percent as the Catholic population has grown and parishes in the U.S. have been closed and consolidated." CARA, *The Changing Face*, 1.

¹² L. BOUYER, *The Church of God: Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011, 444.

There are a number of factors that must converge in order to once again make priestly fraternity a real possibility. Among them is the simple acknowledgement that parochial solipsism is culturally normative, fostered by and contributing to, the administrative millstone tied to many priests. Relieve the burden, and recreate the possibility of fraternity. Excavate the rubble, and a solid foundation is again conceivable.

In his ecclesiological masterpiece *The Church of God*, the French Oratorian Louis Bouyer, offers a proposal, that though 50 years old, could not be more timely.

Those functions of *material* governing, which so often occupy three quarters of the bishops' time (and too much of their priests' time) — financial cares, construction and maintenance of buildings as such, and the material details of even authentically charitable concerns — do not belong to the proper domain of bishops or priests. Properly they are tasks of the deacons [..., for] it was only after the practical disappearance of the diaconate that bishops and priests found themselves more and more immersed in these matters, often to the point of drowning in them. As long as there are no deacons to fulfill these tasks, this lack is one of the first things to which bishops and priests should turn, to free themselves, and give them (as much as possible) to laymen of good will.¹³

Bouyer draws the distinction between *material* and *spiritual governance*. He does so principally to recover the spiritual dimension of pastoral governance. In our modern bureaucratic age, there has been a *materialization* of governance, like that of a political or corporate body. The truth of pastoral governance lies in the office (*munus*), a priestly conformity to the *diakonia* of Christ.¹⁴ Even in the Acts of the Apostles, the nascent Church was grappling with the importance of material goods: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2-4). Only by acknowledging this in our own day can a bishop and priest be once again "sufficiently free" to live the life to which he is called.¹⁵

On the authority of Bouyer and his command of the tradition, we hold that the original, normative place of the Church's material governance is the diaconate.¹⁶ For the first five centuries of the Church this order flourished, in a permanent form, as it always has in the East.

¹³ BOUYER, *The Church of God*, 444.

¹⁴ cf. "And that duty, which the Lord committed to the shepherds of His people, is a true service, which in sacred literature is significantly called "diakonia" or ministry (*"Munus autem illud quod Dominus pastoribus populi sui commisit, verum est servitium quod in sacris Litteris "diakonia" seu ministerium significanter nuncupatur."*) LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 24.

¹⁵ cf. BOUYER, *The Church of God*, 444: "It will be said: 'If our bishops wanted to exercise these functions of the ministry [administering the Word, the sacraments and the *cura animarum*], where would they find the time to fulfill their governing function?' Again, it is precisely that bishops be sufficiently free of these governing functions to continue to fulfill, themselves, the functions of doctor, liturgist, pastor, which are essentially theirs, that the priests of second rank were instituted. And we must add: the governing functions which bishops ought to share as widely as possible with the presbyterate are the functions of spiritual governing, directly connected with teaching the faith, the celebration of worship, and the religious and moral life of their flock."

¹⁶ For a presentation of the theology of the diaconate, cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, Vatican City 2002.

After fifteen centuries, the permanent diaconate has now been restored in the West, presenting us with new opportunities. Now these men, ordained "not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service," can be entrusted with the material governance of the Church.¹⁷ This was essential to the Council's very vision of the diaconate:

Dedicated to duties of charity and of *administration*, let deacons be mindful of the admonition of Blessed Polycarp: "Be merciful, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all."¹⁸

Once again, material governance of the parish is not of the proper domain of the parish priest. He does not jettison his *munus regendi* when he entrusts material governance to the diaconate. As pastor, he still remains the one who "juridically represents the parish," the one ensured with the administration of the "goods of the parish."¹⁹ But he need not appropriate the work entirely to himself. Why is he drowning in administration when there is a whole order instituted to assist him?

As compelling as the Bouyer proposal may be, the permanent diaconate remains in need of maturation. Its re-institution was sudden, and still today requires time to develop and deepen. Perhaps we might consider not just deacons but competent and willing lay men for the assistance of governance (as Bouyer suggests). Whether ordained or not, there are those with the skills, experience, and desire to assume the work of material governance with far greater success than we priests have. We don't need seminarians with business training; we need priests with fewer business responsibilities. What *is* required, of both seminarians and priests, is pastoral *phronesis* - the practical wisdom to govern with foresight, perspicacity, and most importantly - a humble trust in collaboration. This is the true spirit of governance, which, uniting the material demands of the parish as a body to a soul, creates a sustainable and healthy model for both priest and parish.

The possibilities open to a priest, free of administrative burdens, are endless. He is now able to live out his *munus docendi*, exercising his role as teacher in the parish. He can exercise his *munus sanctificandi*, deepening the parish's life of prayer and ennobling the liturgy. His *munus regendi*, no longer the office grind of middle management, becomes a true *cura animarum* - the care and guidance of human souls, of which his heart desires and for which he was ordained. Most importantly, he can share life with his brothers and actually tend to his humanity. Only in this fraternal ambit can a man come to the freedom, balance, and consistency of character necessary for him to serve well and long, and to endure hardship for the sake of the Gospel.

Jacques Maritain once said that the great idol of our times is "the titanism of human effort."²⁰ What the Church so desperately needs is not pastoral titans, but Christian men of service who

¹⁷ LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 29.

¹⁸ LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 29.

¹⁹ CODE OF CANON LAW, n. 532.

²⁰ J. MARITAIN, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene 1968, 234.

have the humility to recognize the impossible. Parochial solipsism is the siren call of the parish priest in our day - and it is only going to get louder. If the priest can resist it, he will rediscover in himself true freedom, in his brothers true support, and in Christ the one and true pastor of the parish.

Fr. John Nepil
12 December 2018
Rome, Italy

Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe
11th Anniversary of the founding of the
Companions of Christ, Archdiocese of Denver

Word Count: 3713

Publication Submission:
2 February 2019