



Our Broken Parish

When respect for the laity is lost

BY [A PARISHIONER](#) | FEBRUARY 11, 2008



Do not fret because of the wicked;

do not be envious of wrongdoers....

Trust in the Lord, and do good.

—Psalm 37:1, 3

While we Catholics profess universality, the fact is that Catholic parishes can differ radically. I do not just mean culturally, in the way that a parish on the island of Guam is different from a parish in the city of Stuttgart, but in the way a parish in one part of Los Angeles, say, can be quite different from one in another part of that city. Or in Boston. Or Atlanta. Or Chicago. Parishes vary in music, in ministry, in outreach, in liturgy, in attitude, in teaching style.

In big cities Catholics can parish-shop, looking for a Catholic community that is a good fit for them. Living in a small town, however, can be a difficult proposition for a Catholic. In our town, newcomers can church-shop among the Christian houses of worship, of which there are many. But Catholics have only one choice: our parish.

When my husband and I moved here over 20 years ago, that fact made us a bit nervous. We had come from a metropolitan area, where there was a Catholic church every few miles and where we parish-shopped. When we really liked the homilies of a priest who worked at the parish in the next suburb over, we got permission to switch our affiliation to that parish, which was a 10-minute drive rather than a two-minute drive from our house. In our new small-town life, the next closest Catholic parish was 50 miles away. So we were relieved when our local pastor turned out to be an intelligent, affable older priest with an open mind and an interest in establishing new ministries and services within the parish. He was a delight, and we felt accepted and challenged at our new parish—a healthy combination. We felt lucky. We felt blessed.

Eventually that priest retired and then passed away. He had baptized our two youngest children and had made us feel like an integral part of our faith community. Now, two decades and a couple of pastors later, we are still here. Our Catholic roots are deeply, emphatically here. This is the church where all of our children have come of spiritual age, receiving their first Communion and the sacrament of confirmation, and where friends have been married and buried. But like never before, we are now contemplating making that 50-mile-each-way weekly commute to another parish.

Why? Our parish has become for us a place of anger and artifice, of division and dysfunction. A 50-mile trip does not seem too great a sacrifice to make, if by staying where we are we become resentful, non-practicing Catholics. But the 50 miles does present burdens. At that distance, how can my husband and I both be involved socially and in ministry beyond Sunday Mass, the way we want to be? How does our teenager feel about attending a youth group full of strangers? We are reluctant to commit ourselves to a parish so far from home.

A New Pastor

The origin of our crisis may be obvious by now: we have a new pastor. The new pastor has brought new priorities with which we do not agree. He also believes that the parishioners are the sheep and he is the shepherd, which translates to: My way or the highway. He enjoys all the power, without the intuition or skill of leadership.

Since his arrival, the parish staff has experienced a 100 percent turnover (including this writer), and three deacons have requested assignments elsewhere. That's right: at parishes 50 miles away. The parish office, as well as the finance council, is currently staffed by good Catholics who believe that enduring the ego and wrath of their boss is simply an opportunity to turn some exquisite suffering over to God. For the greater glory of God and the Catholic Church, these suffering servants put up with impossible working conditions. For those of us who used to work there, the conditions were affecting our health, our families, our ministries—indeed, our faith—in unacceptable ways. One by one, through various combinations of prayer, counseling and sleepless nights, we came to the painful conclusion that the only sane option, the only way to relieve our cognitive dissonance, was to give notice.

It is hard to describe the parish situation without appearing to cast stones. Every priest is unique in his gifts and his shortcomings, and living in and contributing to an authentic faith community is never simple or easy. Of course there will be differences of opinion, and differing commitments and callings, among parishioners. But the Gospel is the Gospel. To be a dwelling place for the Gospel, a healthy parish requires cooperation, compassion, listening, honesty, respect, trust and shared goals, just for starters. But when all of those things go missing, the community has no foundation on which to rest as it weathers storms. The storms take over. The structure is lost.

Broken, Isolated, Adrift

We are, I believe, a broken parish. We do not really know what to do, other than pray. The priest shortage is partly to blame, as is our own surrender to frustration. Our pastor has accused some of us of a conspiracy to bring him down, but really, we are just broken in our own little ways, isolated and adrift. Some of us who can afford the gas commute to other parishes. Some of us skip Mass. Some of us have begun to give our offerings to other charities, where our dollars will be put to responsible and life-affirming use. We realize, when we are berated for the dwindling collection plate, that we have perhaps hit upon the only vote that counts: our money. This makes us even sadder.

We are Catholics in search of a parish, wanting to practice the corporal works of mercy, but wanting also to be treated as adult persons of faith. We understand the shepherd imagery, but we are not actually sheep. We are thoughtful, functional, searching, caring grownups of good will. We require honesty, a well-formed conscience and a bit of humility in a pastor, because, like it or not, the pastor makes or breaks a parish. I have lately wondered how many other Catholics, in other parts of the world, have decided to sit out parish life because of a heedless hierarchy addicted to trappings and power. How many laypeople find that their gifts and talents go unused, that their leaders are not interested in what they have to say or to offer, that although they are believers, they just do not need the grief of parish life? And if, besides, no one seems to miss them?

If Jesus himself, disguised as a layperson, visited some of our parishes, if he sat somewhere in the middle and did not sing very loudly and forgot his envelope, would he feel welcomed, loved and necessary?

I may be disillusioned and discouraged, but I am also stubborn. Much as I mourn our current state of affairs, I tell myself that I refuse to leave. Not only am I a Catholic, I tell myself; I am also a local Catholic. Our parish may be broken, but our faith is not dead, not as long as we find ways to see Christ in others and as long as we try to be the face and hands of Christ for others. We are called to live as Christ's followers, a call we must honor and answer, even when we are tired and tapped out, and even when our parish gets in the way.

All the same, each week, I edge a little closer to that long commute. I know that through the centuries the church has survived and grown despite bad pastors, misguided bishops and inept popes. But probably not without some serious parish-shopping on the part of the laity.

The author is not identified here to protect both the staff and pastor of the parish described.