The Church, The National Parish and Immigration: Same Old Mistakes

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United States they would work equally well in different contexts. To pursue a policy of national parishes in other countries on the basis of the American experience — and without much more careful evaluation of that experience — could be disastrous.

There are American scholars who contend that the national parish and the urban political machine were of critical importance in the adjustment of the immigrant groups to American society; both institutions enabled the newcomers to remain ethnic while becoming American and thus acted as a bridge between the world and the new. Again this observation seems so obvious that it would be folly to deny it; but unfortunately we have little more than unproven assertions to go on. Surely the parish was and still is an important institution in the life of ethnic communities in the United States. But we don’t know how important and we don’t know whether it was more important to some groups than to others (although there is some indication that it was more important to the Poles than to the Italians and more important to either than it is to the Puerto Ricans).

Thus any discussion of the future of the national parishes is notably handicapped by the lack of information as to what their past influence really was. However, it is possible to raise at least a few questions which will have to be faced by these parishes:

1) What happens when the immigrant group moves out of the neighborhood where the national parish is and is replaced by other groups — or by industry and super highways?

In some American cities there are as many as five Catholic churches within a quarter-mile square, each one to serve a different ethnic group. (In one city there are four at one intersection.) But in many of the communities the ethnic populations have long since left the neighborhood and the churches remain to serve a population that is largely un-Catholic or even nonexistent because residences have been replaced by industrial or highway development. Urban parishes can of course be retooled to serve the new immigrant populations (mostly Negro) but the national parish, which was designed for a very different purpose, is particularly difficult to restructure. Secondly, even though the size and variety of the Catholic population may have required at one time several parishes, the new population often requires
only one. This means that parishes must be consolidated and parish facilities coordinated. The long tradition of separation of the various national parishes makes this administratively very difficult. Many of the national parishes in the inner city are little more than ghost parishes, surviving by force of tradition and the financial generosity of those who have moved away, but making little contribution to the work of the Church — or at least not contributing in proportion to the expense involved in maintaining them.

2) What happens to the national parish when a new generation grows weary of the customs and tradition of the national parish?

If Will Herberg and Marcus Hansen are to be believed the second generation turns away from the customs of the old world while the third returns to some of the customs that its parents have rejected. Many of the national parishes are going through the second generation experience at the present time. The immigrants and perhaps some of their children feel comfortable with the customs, the style, the language of the national parish because it keeps alive the memory of the land they left behind. However, the Catholics born in the United States have little affinity for the land their parents came from and often view the national parish as citadel of outmoded customs. Hence, there is a very strong tendency for younger people to attend churches which are “American”, that is to say, the territorial parish in their neighborhood; and, whatever the canonical regulations may be, it is extremely difficult to prevent it. Furthermore, younger people who do not consider national customs so terribly important will very likely go to the church nearest to them, no matter what its national background. Thus, in one German national parish with which I am familiar, one-fourth of the membership is Irish and one-fourth Polish. Most pastors in such situations resign themselves to their inability to control who comes to their church and accept anyone who comes; thus, in neighborhoods where there are many national parishes, the church to which a person goes may have nothing to do with his nationality; and at least some Catholic change parishes frequently without ever moving their residence. If ethnic feelings were still strong this would not happen; but in fact the more obvious ethnic feelings are not nearly as strong as they used to be.
3) What happens to a system of national parishes when the Catholic population moves to the suburbs?

There has been very little construction of national parishes since the end of the second World War. While some ethnic enclaves have appeared in the new suburbs, the demand for specifically national parishes has not been very strong. Indeed, it often seems that the Catholics who move to the suburbs are precisely the ones who do not want a national parish and would indeed strongly resist the foundation of such parishes. In some suburbs where there are large numbers of a given ethnic group the territorial parish may well have clergy of that ethnic background and may preserve a few old world customs; but it is very much like most other territorial parishes and tends to be proud of the fact that it is not national. Attempts to maintain customs from the older neighborhood national parishes encounter strong resistance not only from the Americanized members of the ethnic group but also from members of other ethnic groups who happen to be within the boundaries of the suburban "quasi-ethnic" parish. Even if the clergy wanted to maintain these customs (and most of them do not) there would be considerable risk in doing so, especially since the financial condition of many of these new suburban parishes is usually such that the clergy dare not offend any sizable group of parishioners.

4) What happens to the "superstructure" of the national parishes when Americanization and movement of populations make these parishes less necessary and less feasible?

In many large dioceses there are not only national parishes, but national cemeteries, welfare agencies, newspapers, orphanages, old peoples homes, and social organizations. Such institutions still serve some purpose but with the decline of national parishes and the waning of powerful ethnic loyalties, the reason for such institutions are less convincing. Yet they are still the objects of powerful loyalty, especially among the older clergy, and resistance to their transmutation will be strong indeed. Diocesan administrators are reluctant to try to consolidate such work even though in many instances there is much duplication of effort and waste of resources. However, pressure for change is bound to increase with the years.

6) The New Catholic child

In the United States, a child and the educational system is the key part for the new Catholic. On the one hand, children are looked after by the clergy in the national parish; on the other hand, the picture in immigration has become more like that in the Americanized population. Each year in the 1900's, there has been an increasing number of new arrivals, largely from Latin America.

Serious revision of conditions was made only occasionally. The new arrivals, which were often not national in origin, brought with them the need for a new system of education.
5) Is the era of the national parish over?

In many ways, it seems to be. The children and grandchildren of the pre-1920's immigrants are moving to the suburbs. In the territorial parish there is no considerable demand on their part for new national parishes in the suburbs and no inclination on the part of Church leadership to establish many such parishes. On the contrary, both the descendants of the immigrants and their clergy and hierarchy seem to think that the age of the immigrant national parish is over. It is a rare young priest who wants to have anything to do with an assignment to such a parish. On the other hand, there are two recent events that may modify the picture somewhat. First of all, there is the considerable increase in immigration to the United States--more than two million have come here in the last decade. One quarter of the increase in the American population is due to immigration. A substantial portion of this immigration is Catholic. For example, it is estimated that in excess of thirty thousand Italians enter the United States each year. While this immigration is not of the size of the early 1900's and it is added to a much larger population base, it is still an important phenomenon in American society, even if it passes largely unnoticed (especially by the Church).

Secondly, there has been, as I predicted in an earlier version of this article, a resurgence of interest in the old ethnic traditions among the grandchildren of the immigrants. This has been occasioned perhaps in part by the new black consciousness, but which may well have occurred in any case. It is not clear that the national parishes, or indeed any of the other old institutions of immigrant culture, can make any kind of positive response to the new ethnic emphasis; but at least an opportunity is present for a new lease on life.

6) What is being done to provide for the spiritual needs of the new immigrants?

One must respond by saying, not very much. Indeed, it frequently seems that we are witnessing a reply of all the mistakes made at the turn of the century with the native American Catholic Church first pretending that the immigrants weren't there, then dismissing them as a not very serious problem. Unfortunately, there are not now likely to be the pressures from
Europe or even the pressures from within the American Church that there were sixty and seventy years ago. Hence, the new immigrants are not as likely to be as successful as the old immigrants were in demanding attention for themselves and their religious and human problems.

7) Why is there so little interest in the new immigrants in the American Church?

Probably because American Catholics have at last been fully accepted as partners, albeit junior ones, in the American experience—an acceptance symbolized by the election of John Kennedy to the Presidency in 1960. The immigrant era in which we were the despised outcasts has been left behind. Oh, there may still be considerable discrimination against Italians and Poles and even Irish Catholics, but it is of a subtle variety that does not prevent us from having our full share of the comforts of American society. We have just emerged from the immigrant era with its parochialism, defensiveness, insecurity. To suggest that there are still large numbers of immigrants among us with problems similar to those experienced by our ancestors in the beginning of the century would imply that we really haven’t escaped our own past. Neither the clergy nor the laity want to admit this, and one suspects that the Catholic intelligentsia, so pathetically eager to be free of its own tradition, would be piously horrified of the thought that the tradition is still very much with us.

8) Is there much hope that the Church will take advantage of the ethnic revival to respond positively to the needs of the new immigrants?

One is forced to say that there is practically no hope at all. The same old mistakes will be made and, if anything, they will be worse this time around.

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