

Toward a Pastoral Theological Understanding of the Parish as a Place of Eucharistic Pilgrimage

C. Kevin Gillespie 

Pages 111-124 | Published online: 17 Sep 2018

- [Download citation](#)
- <https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2018.1515409>

•

In this article

- [HOLY TRINITY PARISH, GEORGETOWN](#)
- [THE PARISH AS THE CONTEXT FOR A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER](#)
- [PARISH AS A PLACE TO FORM A "CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER"](#)
- [DEFINING AND DESCRIBING A PARISH](#)
- [PARISH IN THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC CULTURE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW](#)
- [DEMOGRAPHICS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN CATHOLICISM](#)
- [PARISH AS AN ECCLESIAL PLACE FOR THE EUCHARISTIC PLACE](#)
- [PARISHIONERS AS PILGRIMS](#)
- [THE NEW EVANGELIZATION](#)
- [LOOKING BACKWARD FORWARD](#)
- [References](#)

Articles

Toward a Pastoral Theological Understanding of the Parish as a Place of Eucharistic Pilgrimage

- [Full Article](#)
- [Figures & data](#)
- [References](#)

- Citations
-
- Metrics
- Reprints & Permissions
- PDF

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which a Roman Catholic parish can be understood theologically as a place for pilgrimage toward a Eucharistic place in and through which a “culture of encounter” occurs and is fostered. A context is set for pastoral theological considerations through an overview of American Catholic history that offers lenses of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century patterns of Catholic immigration to the United States, as well as current demographics and the phenomenon of disaffiliation. In addition, this paper considers the ways by which contemporary spiritual movements may find their place within a parish. In this respect, a parish is seen as providing a sense of pilgrimage toward “the Eucharistic place,” enabling it to serve as a vehicle for the Church’s efforts toward a “new evangelization.” The author’s parish, Holy Trinity Parish in Washington, DC, is presented as an example.

Keywords: [Culture of encounter](#), [disaffected Catholics](#), [Eucharistic place](#), [immigrant parishes](#), [new evangelization](#), [pilgrimage](#)

Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, “What do you want?” They answered, “Rabbi”—which means Teacher—“where do you live?” He replied, “Come and see”; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him that day. It was about the tenth hour. (John 1 37–38)

“Come and see.” Jesus’s response to the question, “Where do you live?” invites one to follow today, just as it did 2000 years ago. A parish represents a place where Jesus lives. As a place, a parish serves as a way of collecting people with a common identity as Christians, particularly in and through the liturgical acts inside the parish church. Of course, as the passage from John’s Gospel reveals, the Risen Christ is not confined to any particular place or any specific time.

This paper will present a discussion of some of the dimensions of a parish as a place where Christ is present within a sacred context of people. From a pastoral theological perspective, I intend to demonstrate how the contemporary Catholic parish represents a complex system of interrelated ministries. Three specific characteristics are highlighted: parish as a place of pilgrimage; parish as a Eucharistic place; and parish as a place to develop a “culture of encounter.”

I will offer examples of these characteristics as they are manifested at Holy Trinity Parish, Washington, DC, where I serve as pastor.

As a way of understanding the particular parish as it exists as a system within a system, namely the Catholic Church in the United States, it would be helpful to consider some of the historical and current sociological factors affecting Catholic parishes in the United States. I will present an overview of American Catholic history that offers lenses of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century patterns of Catholic immigration to the United States, as well as current demographics and the phenomenon of disaffiliation.

HOLY TRINITY PARISH, GEORGETOWN

Holy Trinity Parish in the Georgetown district of Washington, DC, has a 300-year-old tradition of supporting the spiritual journeys of parishioners. Founded in 1792, the parish has long been associated with Georgetown University and as a result has benefited from the vibrant intellectual life of a nearby university campus. Upon my arrival as pastor in 2015, I introduced into the parish a process called the Parish Assessment and Renewal Project (PAR).¹¹ Sweetser, *The Parish as Covenant*. View all notes Developed by Fr. Thomas Sweetser, SJ, the project is based upon a pastoral theory of viewing a parish as a complex system with various subcultures (e.g. the culture of religious education, the culture of social justice, the culture of youth ministry, and so forth). Moreover, if there is a school associated with a parish, there is the culture of a Catholic school. Sweetser has observed that often the subcultures become silos, and while folks may be cooperative, they are not as collaborative as they could be.

The parish is richly blessed, but its complexity is evident in that it has twenty-three full-time employees, about 600 volunteers, and more than 100 sponsored groups. Moreover, the parish school has more than sixty employees engaged in educating about 340 students. As part of the PAR process, Holy Trinity Parish met with leaders of the Parish's nine committees and then engaged in six processes so as to assess their effectiveness. The committees were: Adult and Youth Faith Formation, Communications, Development, Finance, Ignatian Spirituality, Parish Life, Social Justice, School, and Worship. The process included: (1) a parish survey; (2) in-depth study groups; (3) identification of priority needs; (4) parish town hall meetings; (5) a report from the PAR consultant team; and (6) development of future parish goals.

Among the fruits of the PAR process is a new Parish Mission Statement that was painted on a wall or placed on a plaque in strategic spots of the parish campus. The Statement reads:

We are a Jesuit Catholic parish that welcomes all to

Accompany one another in Christ

Celebrate God's love

Transform lives

Another byproduct of the PAR process is the ways in which the parish mobilized in the fall of 2016 to respond to Pope Francis' call to promote a "culture of encounter." The following is an account of how this phenomenon was constructed and how it engaged various levels of the parish.

THE PARISH AS THE CONTEXT FOR A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER

It began in October of 2016, when several parishioners spoke to one another about the challenge Pope Francis made to Europeans of finding ways to respond to the desperate plight of the refugees flowing into Europe. Sensing that Americans too should offer some form of hospitality, these parishioners, most of them of the Holy Trinity Parish, Washington, DC, began organizing. Within weeks, the project of adopting a refugee family from Syria began to be realized. Meetings with Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area were held and soon the agency assigned to the parish a specific refugee family. They were the Cheikho family, a Kurdish Syrian family of eight.

The parish group's enthusiasm grew with the family assignment and they soon set about engaging the pastor, pastoral leaders, and more parishioners. They addressed the thorny legal issues and various socioeconomic needs by forming committees and subcommittees. A parish-wide awareness was promoted through announcements from the altar and the Parish Bulletin. The adoption process gained momentum and parish-wide support.

There was, however, one serious political problem. In January of 2017, Donald Trump, the new American president, due to alleged fear of certain types of terrorists infiltrating American borders, created a ban on allowing refugees from certain nations to enter the United States. Syria was one of the nations on the list. Therefore, despite having gone through more than a year of processing that included in-depth security checks, it seemed likely that the Cheikhos would not be allowed into the country just days before they were due to arrive.

Fortunately, a nationwide legal response developed, which raised serious questions about the legality of such an executive order. During the same period, parishioners engaged in several responses of their own. These included: an evening prayer service for those refugees who sought entry and had been legally vetted; parishioners'

engagement in demonstrations; a demonstration by more than 300 children from the parish's grade school on the campus of Georgetown University; and legislative advocacy whereby a group of former state department and CIA parishioners used their expertise to visit members of Congress to protest the ban. Then, on February 9, 2017, the decision by a judge from the Ninth Circuit Court led to the temporary suspension of the ban. Finally, on February 16 at 11:25 p.m., with the lifting of the ban, after thirty hours of travel and weeks of waiting, the Cheikho family arrived at Dulles International Airport. With joy, parishioners greeted the refugee family, and a new chapter of the parish's new "culture of encounter" was begun.

PARISH AS A PLACE TO FORM A "CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER"

One of the innovative and central themes of the papacy of Pope Francis has been advocacy for the poor and marginalized, especially refugees. Through exhortations and sermons, the pope has spoken of the need to encounter Christ anew and for churches to create a "culture of encounter." The pope believes that this may happen through "a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least openness to letting him encounter them."² Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation*, Paragraph 3. View all notes He describes this form of culture as a face-to-face encounter and as a way to engage in meaningful conversations. He contrasts this form of engaging persons with a "throwaway culture" whereby people are seen as objects and of little value. In this respect, the pope seems to be drawing from phenomenological philosophers, several of who highlighted the phenomenon of encounter. Popular during the decade of the 1960s when the future pope was doing his philosophical and theological studies as a Jesuit, their writings no doubt influenced him. As William Luijpen, a Dutch Augustinian priest, noted, encounter may be synonymous with dialogue (Remy Kwant), participation (Gabriel Marcel), and presence (Maurice Merleau-Ponty). Luijpen even states that it is synonymous with a form of empathy.³ Luijpen, *Existential Phenomenology*, 37 View all notes Efforts to go beyond Catholicism's traditional Thomistic thought through phenomenology with a heightened thematization of experience became a significant force in the philosophical anthropology that emerged from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). It no doubt inspired the young priest and the future pope, Jorge Bergoglio.

Moreover, the phenomenology of "encounter" also resonated as an important theme within Catholic theology of the time. Edward Schillibeeckx, a Dutch Dominican and an influential theologian of the period, used "encounter" as a way to cast his Christology, noting that Christ is the encounter with God and the seven sacraments as the ways to encounter Christ. This may be seen by the titles of two of his popular works: *The Sacraments as an Encounter with God* (1957) and *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (1963). In the latter work, Schillibeeckx summed up the concept of encounter:

On Christ's side, the possibility of a human encounter is positively established. Human encounter, however, calls for mutual availability. ... But we, earthy men [sic], cannot encounter him in the living body (*in propria carne*) because his glorification has made him invisible to us.

... it follows from the dogma of the perpetuity of the incarnation, and of Christ's human mediation of grace, that if Christ does not show himself to us in his own flesh, then he can make himself visibly present to us and for us earthbound men [sic] only by taking of earthly non-glorified realities into his glorified saving activity. This earthly element replaces for us the invisibility of his bodily life in heaven. This is precisely what the sacraments are: the face of redemption turned visibly toward us, so that in them we are truly able to *encounter* [my emphasis] the living Christ. The heavenly saving activity, invisible to us, becomes visible in the sacraments.⁴⁴ Schillibeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 43–44. View all notes

Since his use of the phrase "culture of encounter" seems to resemble Schillibeeckx's phenomenological use of the term "encounter," we may presume that the future pope, Jorge Bergoglio, was influenced by Schillibeeckx's seminal work. Using Schillibeeckx's notion of "encounter," Pope Francis, through his "culture of encounter," created a different frame of reference for the Church's seven sacraments, most notably the Eucharist. But the pope seems to extend the concept of encounter further by placing it in the phrase "the culture of encounter," suggesting that besides the sacraments there are other ways to encounter Christ. One in particular is the meeting the poor and the marginalized face to face. His support for the cause of refugees represents this point.

DEFINING AND DESCRIBING A PARISH

According to the Catholic Catechism, a parish is:

[a] definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan Bishop. It is the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of the liturgical life: it gathers them together in the celebration; it teaches Christ's saving doctrine; the practice of charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love.⁵⁵ The United States Conference of Bishops, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2179. View all notes

Etymologically speaking, the word "parish" is derived from the Latin "*parochial*," which has its origins in the Greek word *paroikia*. One derivative of this Greek is the *paroikos*, which denotes a sojourner or a pilgrim. The early Christians used *paroikia* to refer to the

local Christian community under the care of a bishop. This role of the pastor as a representative of the bishop's ecclesial authority evolved historically over time, and the terms "parish" and "diocese" were used interchangeably until the sixth century.

It was Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) who particularly organized the church around goals designed to nurture the *cura animarum*, viz., the care of the soul. His landmark *The Pastoral Rule of the Church* (590) offered guidelines for organizing church structures and systems around the care of the souls of Christians. Over time and through a wide array of diverse cultures, the Church created a system of sacraments by means of which believers individually and collectively nurtured their soul. They did so through the various stages of their life, from birth through identity formation and vocational decisions through sickness and eventual death. The seven sacraments were first enumerated by Peter Lombard (1100–1160) and became institutionalized through the Middle Ages. Then, in 1439 at the Council of Florence, the seven sacraments were formally affirmed.

A parish, of course, is more than the sacraments or, for that matter, what happens within the confines of a church service. The happenings in the church spaces and during certain times serve to shape the minds and motivations of the people who participate. Their sense of belonging to a community of faith involves not only what happens in the church on Sundays, but also what occurs in and through their communal worship experiences. The sense of belonging to a faith community, however, has a unique history in the United States. For the purpose of this paper, I provide a brief consideration of how Catholic parishes enable immigrants to the United States to develop this sense of belonging.

PARISH IN THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC CULTURE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The noted Catholic historian, Jay Dolan, in his seminal work *The American Catholic Experience*,⁶ Dolan, *The American Experience*, 10. View all notes noted that one significant factor among Catholic parishes in the United States is that Catholicism began as an immigrant religion in a nation with an overwhelmingly Protestant culture. In 1790, Catholicism was a small sect of some 90,000 people with considerably less influence than Quakers, Unitarians, or deists. By 1815, the number of Catholics in the nascent nation had more than doubled to 200,000. Then, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a potato blight in Ireland triggered a famine that resulted in the emigration of millions of Irish, most of them Catholic, to the United States. The waves of Irish Catholic immigration increased the overall Catholic population in the United States so that by 1850 the Roman Catholic Church, with 1,340,500 members, became the largest religious

denomination in the new Protestant country. A decade later, Catholics numbered more than three million. Despite significant opposition in the form of bigotry and American nativism, Catholics gradually assimilated into American culture. The fact that so many immigrants sacrificed their lives and livelihoods during the American Civil War served as a significant impetus for their acceptance into American society. Besides the onslaught of Irish immigrants coming to American shores, nine other distinctive Catholic ethnic groups are described by Dolan,⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 129–135. View all notes each having distinctive patterns of settlement, work, and economic mobility. They all, nevertheless, tended to find support and sustenance around a parish. The other nine were the Germans, who, according to Conzen, emigrated in three phases: (1) the preindustrial phase before 1865; (2) the *Kulturkumpf* phase when German Catholics left their homeland due to prejudice and persecution between 1865 and 1895; and (3) 1895–1920, a third phase.⁸⁸ Conzen, “Germans,” 405–425. View all notes

Significant Italian immigration began in the 1880s, with close to one million settling by the turn of the century and another three million by the second decade of the new century. Similarly, a plethora of Polish immigrants began arriving in the United States in the 1880s and reached almost three million by the early decades of the twentieth century. During the same period, close to one million French Canadians immigrated across their nation’s southern borders into the United States, most notably to the New England states. Meanwhile, thousands of Mexican Catholics who had settled in territories were “annexed” into the American culture after the Mexican–American War. A migration pattern eventually evolved whereby large numbers of Mexicans went seasonally from Mexico to the American Southwest and West for agricultural work. Then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, with civil disturbances and persecution in Mexico, several hundred thousand Mexican Catholics found permanent US residency. Their numbers greatly increased toward the latter part of the twentieth century, eventually leading to controversies surrounding illegal immigration and a crisis of illegal border crossings in states aligned with Mexico.

An estimated 500,000 Slovaks immigrated in the later decades of the nineteenth and early decade of the twentieth centuries, and during the same period, some 350,000 Czechs arrived in the United States. Also, in the fifty years prior to World War I, an estimated 300,000 Catholics emigrated from Lithuania to the United States. Finally, during the same period, about 250,000 Ukrainian Catholics or Ruthenians immigrated.

These ethnic Catholics formed the bulk of the Catholic parishes before World War II. Following the War, new waves of Catholic immigrants flowed into the country from Asia, especially the Philippines. Also, large numbers of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Thais came to the United States after the Vietnam War in 1975, many of whom were Catholic. In more recent years, due to the tumult caused by wars and drug cartels, hundreds of

thousands of immigrants, predominantly Catholic, flowed in from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala.

The phenomenon of ethnic parishes served to respond to the needs of many immigrants, so that they often collected around the educational, labor, and recreational programs developed at or through the parish. Immigrant societies were established, as well as Catholic schools. Their distinct entities served to characterize American Catholic parishes in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. Institutions such as Catholic elementary and secondary schools, often sponsored by parishes, were essentially free of charge due to the sacrifices of large numbers of religious men and women, as well as lay teachers. Moreover, the generosity of the Catholic laity was manifested through Catholic philanthropic organizations such as the Knights of Columbus and the Knights and Dames of Malta. These distinct Catholic entities served to characterize American Catholic institutions and parishes in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. Despite occasional controversies, these organizations functioned within the Catholic Church's hierarchical authority structure, which culminated in the pastor's role, who in turn represented the centralized authority of the local diocesan Bishop.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

So as to consider the context of the contemporary American Catholic parish, I explore some of its important demographic factors. According to the *2017 Catholic Directory*, there are 17,576 parishes throughout 196 geographical archdioceses and dioceses that serve 71,163,054 Catholics. The latter number comprises 22% of the American population. American Catholic congregations comprise the third largest religion in the United States, behind Southern Baptists and United Methodists.⁹⁹ Kennedy and Sons, *The Official Catholic Directory*. View all notes

In 2009, a study known as "The Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project," a Lilly Endowment, Inc.-funded collaboration of five Catholic national ministerial organizations, commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University to conduct a series of three surveys of American Catholic parishes. Their major findings are presented below.¹⁰ Gray et al., "The Changing Face." View all notes

LOCATION AND SIZE OF THE CATHOLIC PARISH

The average year of parish founding is 1920. About a third of US Catholic parishes were established after 1950 and another third before 1900. Parishes also provided the year of

construction for the current church buildings, where most parishes reported that buildings were constructed in the 1940s and 1950s. Some 37% of US Catholic parishes are in the Midwest and 24% are in the Northeast. More than one in five parishes (22%) are in the South and only 17% are in the West. In the last decade, through a combination of closing and mergers, Church leaders have reduced the number of Catholic parishes in the United States by 1359 parishes (a decline of 7.1%). In 2000, the Church had more than 19,000 parishes nationally, and by decade's end, it had fewer than 17,800, almost the same number as in 1965. US parishes average 3277 (median of 1950) individual registered parishioners. In 2000, the average number of registered parishioners was 2260. This number has risen by 45% as the Catholic population has grown and parishes in the United States have been closed and consolidated. Smaller parishes are more likely than larger parishes to be closed or consolidated. Some 40% of all growth in registered parishioners in US parishes from 2005 to 2010 was among Hispanic/Latino(a)s.

WORSHIP AND SACRAMENTS

The average number of Mass attenders at Sunday/Saturday Vigil Masses on a typical weekend in October is 1110 (median of 750). On average, this number represents 38% of registered parishioners and 47% of parish capacity (number of Masses multiplied by seating capacity). Smaller parishes have a higher proportion of parishioners attending Mass than larger parishes. The typical US parish has 57 infant baptisms, 58 first communions, 44 confirmations, 14 marriages, and 29 funerals each year.

PARISH PROGRAMS AND STAFF

Parishes are most likely to have programs and ministries for sacramental preparation, religious education, and for the infirm and homebound (86% or more). Majorities have youth ministry (76%), ministry to seniors (64%), social services to meet individual needs (59%), and ministry to the bereaved (54%).

The estimated number of lay ecclesial ministers (paid in ministry for at least twenty hours per week) in the United States is approximately 38,000 (2.1 per parish). Some 14% of these individuals are vowed religious and 86% other laypersons. Overall, 80% are female and 20% male. Some 7% are under the age of thirty. Some 11% are in their thirties and 22% are in their forties. Thus, four in ten lay ecclesial ministers are estimated to be under the age of fifty. It is estimated that the United States Church is adding about 790 new lay ecclesial ministers to parish ministry staffs each year. Nearly half of all individuals on parish staffs are laywomen (49%). Including religious sisters (3%), parish staffs in the United States are 52% female. Priests account for 18% of parish staff members and deacons make up 4%. Religious brothers are 1% of parish staff members

and other laymen make up 21% of all parish staff members. Among ministry staff, lay persons are fewer in number and clergy are more prevalent. One in four ministry staff is a diocesan priest (24%). Some 14% of ministry staff are deacons, 6% are religious priests, 5% are religious sisters, and 1% are religious brothers; half are other lay ministry staff. Some 56% of all parish staff members are between the ages of fifty and sixty-nine. Some 55% of ministry staff is of this age.

Father Thomas Gaunt, the president of CARA, spoke of the phenomenon of “in-migration” influencing American Catholicism in general and specifically Catholic parishes. He noted, for instance, that while sixty years ago the largest number of American Catholics lived in the Northeastern part of the United States, only a quarter of American Catholics now reside there, as they have in-migrated to large sections of the South and the West.¹¹ Roberts, “CARA Sociologists.” View all notes Gaunt’s colleague, Mary Gautier, CARA’s director of research, related that when the Catholics in-migrated, they did not bring their institutions with them. It was these very parishes that were the dwelling places of the mostly European immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² Ibid. View all notes In recent years, however, there has been a significant decline of baptized Catholics remaining in the church. The next section considers this phenomenon of disaffection.

“NONES” AND DISAFFILIATED CATHOLICS

In recent years, a significant number of Catholics, Christians, and believers in general have become disaffected with institutional religion. The scandal of the sexual abuse by Catholic clergy no doubt has been a significant factor. There have, however, been other factors, among them how Americans across different religious groups increasingly identify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious.” For instance, in 2017, a Pew Foundation research study found that about a quarter of US adults (27%) fit into this category, commonly referred to as “Nones.” The study found that this phenomenon has been increasing over the past five years and is widespread among men and women, as well as Hispanics and blacks. The study noted that only 54% of adults in the United States see themselves as religious, while 75% consider themselves to be spiritual. This phenomenon, of course, has a significant impact on religious institutions in general and Catholic parishes in particular.¹³ Lipka and Gecewicz, “More Americans.” View all notes

Similar religious disaffection was found in another study of young American Catholics produced by St. Mary’s Press and CARA. Titled “Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics,” it provided reasons as to why young Catholics no longer practice their faith. Among the findings were:

- Some 35% identified as having no religious affiliation.

- Some 9% said they are some other non-Protestant Christian affiliation.
- Some 14% identified as atheist or agnostic.
- Some 9% identified as Protestant.
- Fewer than one in ten of the remaining responded with some other religious affiliation, such as Mormon, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Eastern Orthodox Christian, or Muslim.¹⁴14 St. Mary's Press, "Going, Going, Gone!."View all notes

Perhaps the most revealing finding was that when they were asked when it was that they no longer saw themselves as Catholic, "74 percent of the sample said between the ages of 10 and 20, with the median age being 13 years old."¹⁵15 Ibid.View all notes The report, moreover, found that while disaffiliated youth might believe in what Jesus taught, they do not believe in the church's dogmas and doctrines and perceive that religious beliefs were forced upon them, believing that they can live ethical lives without a need for institutional religion. As in the case of the Pew Study noted above, this study has important implications for the institutional church and Catholic parishes in particular.

It should be noted that, in many Catholic parishes, the Sacrament of Confirmation is often bestowed at or around the age of thirteen. While the process of receiving the Sacrament may be a meaningful formation in the life of a fledgling teenager, too often it is perceived by the recipient as forced and not significantly supported by parents, leading to the conception that Confirmation is the process by which one begins to leave the Church.

PARISH AS AN ECCLESIAL PLACE FOR THE EUCHARISTIC PLACE

Hoover offers a fresh theological perspective on the parish, considering it as an "ecclesial" place. He defines it as "a geographical site situated in particular contexts where ecclesial relationships of communion unfold by the power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of God's mission."¹⁶16 Hoover, "A Place for Communion," 825.View all notes Hoover notes that Karl Rahner considered a parish as "The Place where the church's event is manifested, namely The Eucharist."¹⁷17 Rahner, "Theology of the Parish," 23–35. Cited in Hoover, "A Place for Communion," 826.View all notes In this respect, one might consider that every time parishioners come to church, they are journeying to an event, which theologically defines their life, namely believers in Christ in and through the Eucharist.¹⁸18 As found in the 1995 edition of *The Catholic Catechism* (p. 1324), the Eucharist is considered for Roman Catholics to be the "source and summit" and the

“sum and summary” of Christian life. As explained in the Catechism, all of the Church’s other sacraments and ministries are related and oriented to the Eucharist. “For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch ...”.View all notes Their movement then may be viewed as mini-pilgrimages.

With this consideration of place in mind, when each time a person begins walking to church or gets in a car, moves in and out of traffic, struggles with the stress of finding a parking space (especially on Sundays), and tries to find a seat, he or she is on a journey, and that journey is realized at The Central Event of the parish Church, the Eucharist. Moreover, for the devout Catholic, belief in Christ’s Presence in the Most Blessed Sacrament manifested in the Tabernacle further denotes the motivation to move forward with an intention to enter into the Divine Presence. In this respect, movements, however small, can be viewed as taking part in the movements and purposes of pilgrims to a religious shrine. Meanwhile, in an analysis of “Eucharistic Place,” Scott describes the moral identity of a pilgrim as different from that of a tourist, using as a case study the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem. He writes:

Eucharistic Place is embodied practice: it refers to actual congregations in specific places. Christian communities are not resident aliens in the sense of being rootless; Eucharist can only be celebrated in places. This bread and this wine in this place present Jesus Christ. However the Church does not seek to create, protect or nurture ecclesial place. Rather, it responds and witnesses to an eschatological event: the Church “has a place, but that place has as its centre of gravity in the church’s home towards which it remains on pilgrimage.”¹⁹ Scott, “Theology of Eucharistic Place,” 160.View all notes

Hoover’s analysis of the significance of ecclesial place and Scott’s consideration of Eucharistic place has implications for a theological understanding of the parish as a place for pilgrimage. That is to say, the parish serves for the Catholic believer the place toward which they come, seeking to revere the Eucharistic Event.

PARISHIONERS AS PILGRIMS

Throughout my adult life, I have relished pilgrimages. In various formational stages, I have been fortunate to visit many countries on five continents. In so doing, I have come to recognize the difference between “visiting” a place as a tourist and being “formed” by a place as a pilgrimage. Concerning the former, I have come to recognize that anyone can get in a car or fly in a plane to a historic site in another state or a foreign country. It is something different to visit with a place in such a way that the journey is just as important as being there. I have noticed that pilgrimages have added an important spiritual and transcendent dimension to travel, for they have called for a process of

prayer while traveling to the site, being at the site, and traveling from the site. One's experience of the sacred site may thereby become intensified by a sense of God's presence, thereby providing a sense of the sacred at the Eucharistic place.

As a pilgrim, then, I have journeyed to Marian shrines such as Guadalupe, Knock, Fatima, and Lourdes. In addition, I have gone on pilgrimages to The Holy Land twice, to the Pauline sites in Turkey (Ephesus and Colossus) and in Greece (Athens, Corinth, Thessalonica, and Philippi). Furthermore, in a span of forty years, I have made two pilgrimages to the ecumenical monastery at Taize. In each instance, I had a felt sense of being invited to experience the sacred as I traveled and touched the transcendent.

These experiences have led me to encourage pilgrimages in my parish, whereby I invite parishioners to be blessed and missioned before setting out upon their journey. In serving as the pastor of a vibrant urban parish (Holy Trinity in Georgetown, Washington, DC), it has been my joy and privilege to mission as well as accompany parishioners as they are about to leave on a pilgrimage. Often at the end of a liturgy, just before the last blessing, I invite the parishioner-pilgrims to come forward and ask them to inform the congregation about where they are going. I then lead the congregation in a shared blessing for them. These parishioner-pilgrims have been "missioned" to the Holy Land, El Camino de Compostela, and Lourdes. I also have missioned others to service programs in Haiti, El Salvador, and Tanzania. I often ask those missioned, when they return from their pilgrimage and/or mission, to provide some stories of their journey. In so doing, they may complete the circle, whereby they are prayed for by parishioners and they, in turn, may pray for parishioners on the pilgrimage to which they have been sent by the parish.

THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

In response to the increasing numbers of disaffiliated Catholics, the Church has, in recent years, developed strategies of hospitality outreach and social media innovations. For example, in 2017, the University of Notre Dame launched a social media platform designed specifically for millennials. The Grotto Network (<http://grottonetwork.com>), which also includes a weekly email, is designed to serve young men and women between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five whose questions and searching may be led to find a meaningful parish. Such an effort represents a form of the Church's effort, called The New Evangelization, a program designed to invite back the disaffiliated Catholics, who we saw above have become a significant population and represent a serious threat to the Church's future as a viable institution.

The phrase "The New Evangelization" has its origins in Pope John Paul II's 1990 encyclical titled *Redemptoris Missio*. In this late twentieth century encyclical, recognizing

the growing secularization trends in Western societies, the pontiff called for new forms of missionary activity. He saw the need for a coordinated response to the situation "where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a 'new evangelization' or a 're-evangelization'." ²⁰20 John Paul, *Redemptoris Missio*, 33:3. View all notes Challenged by Pope John Paul II's encyclical, dioceses and parishes, especially in the United States, have developed programs designed to attract the disaffiliated. However, given the increasing numbers of disaffiliated Catholics, as noted above, one questions the success of such programs.

Most significantly, the plethora of parish activities ultimately is centered on the liturgies of the Eucharist. Seven times over a weekend, some 2000 parishioners assemble to celebrate the Eucharist. At those times, Holy Trinity Parish does become the Eucharistic place.

LOOKING BACKWARD FORWARD

Let us end where we began, by asking again the disciples' question to Jesus: "Where do you live?" For Catholics who raise this question, Christ may continue to be found in and through their parish. As we have seen for many parishioners, a parish is more than a place to attend mass on Sunday. Indeed, to be a parishioner is to belong to a system composed of a matrix of ministries. For members of a Catholic parish, such as Holy Trinity, this matrix revolves around the Eucharistic, which, as we have seen above, can be viewed as the Eucharist place; the place whereby one believes in the Presence of Christ through the Eucharist. For these parishioners, Christ is encountered in and through the Eucharist, and it is by means of these encounters that a "culture of encounter" is built and sustained, guiding the parishioner as a pilgrim to seek and find where and how Christ lives in the world. As we move further into the twenty-first century and respond to the needs of the "pilgrim people," both within and beyond the parish, it will be well for parish leaders to heighten the significance of personal and cultural encounters. Through a heightened sense of encounter, therefore, parishioners may more readily seek and find where in the twenty-first century Christ lives.

Biographical Note

After receiving a PhD in Pastoral Psychology from Boston University, Father Gillespie served as an Associate Professor of Pastoral Counseling at Loyola University of Maryland from 1996 to 2010. From 2010 to 2012, he served at Loyola University of Chicago as an Associate Provost and the interim Dean of the School of Social Work. He was president of Saint Joseph's University from 2012 to 2015. Since 2015, he has been serving as

pastor of Holy Trinity Parish and is a member of Georgetown University's Jesuit Community. He has published numerous articles as well as a book, *Psychology and American Catholicism: From Confession to Therapy?* (Crossroad, 2001).

ORCID

C. Kevin Gillespie <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1575-9330>

Notes

1 Sweetser, *The Parish as Covenant*.

2 Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation*, Paragraph 3.

3 Luijpen, *Existential Phenomenology*, 37

4 Schillibeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 43–44.

5 The United States Conference of Bishops, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2179.

6 Dolan, *The American Experience*, 10.

7 Ibid., 129–135.

8 Conzen, "Germans," 405–425.

9 Kennedy and Sons, *The Official Catholic Directory*.

10 Gray et al., "The Changing Face."

11 Roberts, "CARA Sociologists."

12 Ibid.

13 Lipka and Gecewicz, "More Americans."

14 St. Mary's Press, "Going, Going, Gone!."

15 Ibid.

16 Hoover, "A Place for Communion," 825.

17 Rahner, "Theology of the Parish," 23–35. Cited in Hoover, "A Place for Communion," 826.

18 As found in the 1995 edition of *The Catholic Catechism* (p. 1324), the Eucharist is considered for Roman Catholics to be the “source and summit” and the “sum and summary” of Christian life. As explained in the Catechism, all of the Church’s other sacraments and ministries are related and oriented to the Eucharist. “For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch ...”.

19 Scott, “Theology of Eucharistic Place,” 160.

20 John Paul, *Redemptoris Missio*, 33:3.

REFERENCES