

Editorial – The church's future is now

By National Catholic Reporter Staff

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For a long time in America, the local parish was the public sacrament, the declaration not only of who we are but that we are. In stone and steeples, stained-glass windows and statuary, accented in Irish or Italian, Polish or German, our immigrant ancestors said as prominently as possible: Here we are, this is who we are.

That's why parish closings for so many are so difficult to bear, and why the future at times is so difficult to imagine.

It is an especially wrenching reality that visits us now, with announcement after announcement of closings and consolidations. How wrapped up is God in all of this, one might ask, if our places of worship can be so quickly shuttered and sold off like so many failed franchises?

Reality is the right word, cold as it may seem, because the church of old is gone. The vibrant, husky communities that once gathered about those urban "plants" have moved on. The old infrastructure of a seemingly endless supply of nuns and priests has long been in decline. The once unassailable institution has been battered by horrible scandal, its credibility deeply damaged.

The upside in all of this -- and there is plenty of reason for hope -- is that American Catholics still care deeply enough to want to imagine a new future. How much help they get along the way will depend on the willingness of our leaders to think and act creatively so that the Catholic community remains a vital public sacrament.

While demographic shifts -- both in the lay population and among the clergy and vowed religious -- make parish closings inevitable, the priest shortage should not be the primary criterion for deciding whether a parish is closed. Alternatives, particularly in the form of parish life coordinator, are canonically available and ought to be pursued if a parish community is otherwise viable and financially self-sustaining.

The question of lay ministry and wider use of women religious and permanent deacons should be explored at much greater depth to determine what roles they already are playing and what roles they could take up in the future to help sustain local communities so that ordained clergy could concentrate on sacramental ministry.

A national conversation on all of these points is already underway, thanks to such groups as the National Association for Lay Ministry and its project, Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership. Its partners in the project, which has produced some very useful study material, are the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development; the

National Association of Church Personnel Administrators; the National Association of Deaconate Directors; the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association; and the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

These are groups that normally work behind the scenes, but they represent those who are on the ground, who know the everyday challenges of sustaining the Catholic community in these trying times. And they know that the church is changing. The future, which will require new structures, deeper involvement of lay ministers and a more mature sense of what constitutes a parish, is not somewhere down the road. It is now.

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