

Mass Matters by Fr. Bausch
Chapter Two: The Importance and Impact of the Parish Church

Two disciples were staring at Jesus as he walked by. Jesus saw them out of the corner of his eye, turned and then said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said, “Teacher, where are you staying?” He replies, “Come and see.” The two disciples went, and they saw. They saw Jesus seeking out the company of the excluded, the wretched, the sick, and the poor. They saw mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and new life. And so, they came to believe. (John 1:36-39).

People are looking for roots long before they are looking for beliefs. People are seeking the lived story long before its official formulations. People are forming relationships long before they embrace religion.... Community comes before religion, belonging comes before believing, story comes before liturgy, and action comes before assent. The proper tactic of religion, therefore, is not to push dogma, but to offer shared experiences...Community first and belief second must be the parish’s strategy. “Come and see.”

The Centrality of the Parish

For a long time, the parish Church in America had always been one of “come and see.” It is where people, summoned out of their individualism to communal worship, most visibly become the Church... in neighborhoods the parish church was usually the “anchor store.”

The parish *was* important. As I once wrote, “...the average Catholic (including future bishops) gets his or her first and lasting impression of ‘the Church’ from the parish; it is there that the first incorporation into the Body of Christ takes place; it is there that the daily dramas of life, union, death, and resurrection are celebrated; and it is there that struggles, failures, and reconciliations occur. The parish is the vital and critical hand that first rocks the ecclesiastical cradle, and so its importance can hardly be overestimated. For Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the parish forms a lasting impression of what “the Church” is all about.

No more. Big city living was not friendly to a communal religion like Catholicism. The bonds of the sustaining and reinforcing structures of family, neighborhood, and ethnic identity slowly became undone. They were undermined by private consumerism and a pervasive secularism. The challenge to the modern parish is to focus on a sense of community, to offer a “come and see” other way of life.

Two Truths to Ponder

The first is this: early on in Christianity, St. Paul began writing to some small, newly formed Christian communities scattered around the Mediterranean. His introductions grab us: “Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians,” or “To the church of God which is in Corinth.” Notice Paul said “to the church”. Yes, the full Church of Jesus was in Thessalonica and Corinth. These churches were in no way subdivisions of the Church in Jerusalem. They were full independent churches united with the others by a common faith, baptism, Eucharist, and apostolic preaching. They were not subsidiary branches of the mother Church in Jerusalem. They were full Church in themselves.

The average Catholic, both clerical and lay, thinks of his or her parish as a subsidiary of the Vatican...But this is clearly not so. You heard St. Paul. The local church exists in its own right and not just as an organizational, administrative sub-unit of the Church universal though connected to it. Vatican II’s doctrine of collegiality was very clear about this. The bishops in their “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (26) remind us: **“This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament.”**

Ramifications

The full Church of Jesus is present in your local parish. The parish with its pastor, the bishop’s representative, is not a mere subdivision of Rome or the diocese. It has its own integrity, shares a common mission, and is the full Church of Jesus Christ in union with others and the bishop of Rome (the

pope) as symbol and capstone of that unity. Moreover that church is the People of God...a people who have been called and commissioned by their baptism to be full adult members presided over by a pastor who has been given Holy Orders; that is, his task is to bring a holy order to the gifts of the people which they possess, not by delegation, but by their own right as baptized members. The pastor's task is not to share his or the bishop's power with the laity but rather to call forth and remind them of the power they already have in virtue of their baptism...being 96% of the Church, the laity is its most public element.

Pyramid to Circle

Most remember the pyramid church: there is the apex at which stands the pope. From there everything moves in a downward spiral to cardinal, archbishops, bishops... monsignors, priests, deacons, religious, lay ministers and, women. This old pyramid is slowly moving to the circle as today the emphasis is not on the holy orders of the few but on the baptism of the many. Vatican II issued a *universal* call to holiness and reminded the laity of its witness to the world and to the Church itself.

Second Truth

Going to Mass is actually good for you, and you should know why...regular religious attendance may add as much as two to three years to one's life...support of regular worship at the parish- where people really look out for each other- helps tremendously to overcome social isolation. Church people show up with dinners when friends are sick, visit them when they're down and raise money for their operations. Probably a third of church members belong to a small group...going to church makes for physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Discussion Questions:

1. The Parish may still be the best venue for renewal. Agree or disagree? _____

2. What's your assessment of St. Francis of Assisi parish? _____

3. Are you active in the parish? Why or why not? _____

4. Meditate on Pope Benedict XVI's words: "The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the saints the Church has produced, and the art which has grown in her womb."