



TOWARD A CULTURE OF DYNAMIC COMMUNITY: PARISH CONSOLIDATION AND THE VALUES OF PROJECT INSPIRE

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Introduction

After a century and a half of steady expansion, Catholic parishes in the United States have entered an era of “restructuring” and “consolidation.” In view of dramatic changes in demographics, material resources, and leadership, some of the most commonly shared experiences among active Catholics in certain parts of the country have come to include resource sharing, cooperation, and outright merging of previously separate communities. The Archdiocese of Chicago has not yet undergone a widespread process of reorganization, of the type that many dioceses in the northeast and elsewhere have already implemented. However, in recent years there have often enough been parishes merged in response to local circumstances. This paper presents and compares two such cases, as part of an ongoing search for better pastoral and ecclesiological foundations for contemporary parish ministry.

Merging Parishes as an Object of Study in the INSPIRE Context

The paper is presented as part of the Milestone Research Conference organized at Loyola University Chicago in October 2013 as a concluding initiative during the terminal year of the Lilly Endowment’s grant for Project INSPIRE. It relies on a variety of research activities that I conducted as the second of two Visiting Research Professors engaged by INSPIRE during the three years prior to the conference. Having done previous research in the subject of closed and merged parishes,¹ I was aware of close connections between that topic and the essential concerns of Project INSPIRE. Clearly, restructuring is a major event of “transition” in a parish and presents a series of occasions for careful pastoral discernment and decision-making. INSPIRE’s work with parish leadership teams has fostered a keen interest in all such issues in the lives of parish staffs and communities. On the other hand, a parish merger presents a serious challenge to the type of collaborative team work that has been INSPIRE’s *raison d’être*. Mergers are fraught with now-familiar problems including community identity and loyalties, turf battles, staff redundancies, and changing clerical leadership roles, the very sorts of problems that can encourage suspicion and even the direct undermining of efforts at collaboration. Further, there is some reason to believe that the entire concept of “parish” as the organizing principle for local Catholic communities is being called into question, in the minds of some parishioners, by the experience of parish mergers. The enormous implications for our ongoing understanding of local church communities and their leadership make “the merged parish” an important object of study as Project INSPIRE bequeaths its experience and its unfinished business to future endeavors.

¹ The “Sources: Related Works” section at the end of this paper contains references to some of this work.

The Method of the Study

As it happened, two clusters of communities that had been merged during their association with INSPIRE into new canonical parishes – “Resurrection” and “Corpus Christi”² –were available as subjects for the present study. Both new parishes were still active in the project when I arrived in Chicago for the 2011-2012 academic year, and so were being actively discussed by INSPIRE staff and consultants. The two clusters had several striking similarities, as well as very clear contrasts, and so promised to evoke a rich variety of questions and issues.

Background information on the parishes came through discussions with INSPIRE staff members and consultants (some of which were recorded and transcribed, or reviewed in field notes), a review of the printed bulletins and internet presence of the two merged parishes, and a review of INSPIRE documents concerning both the new parishes and, in each case, one predecessor parish which had been involved in the INSPIRE process separately. As is the case with every INSPIRE parish, the available documents included application forms, initial learning plans for each team and its individual members, periodic progress reports (both team and individual), periodic consultant reports, and a variety of notes and transcripts of occasional interviews with staff members and consultants.

I also engaged in a series of observations of public worship services (usually Mass) at the three active sites in each parish. My custom was to make these public observations without announcement or self-identification (although pastors and some staff members at both parishes knew who I was and why I was observing). In the course of about eighteen months, I attended at least two Masses or other services in each of the six worship sites at various times and seasons. I supplemented my field notes of these visits with printed materials that I collected at each site – weekly bulletins and occasional printed fliers for special parish, archdiocesan, or neighborhood programs.

As I developed a basic sense of the situation in each parish, I arranged scheduled interviews with a number of staff people. With permission, some of these conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed, and others were reviewed in field notes. Questions were not standardized, but flowed from the conversations, in which I allowed interviewees to elaborate on particular topics as they saw fit. (This approach provided some additional indications of local perceptions and priorities). The interviewees included then-current pastors of both merged parishes and two other priests who had been closely involved in the mergers, a deacon, a business manager, a social service team, several visiting volunteers, and an external researcher familiar with social services in one of the parishes.

All of the reports, field notes, and transcripts mentioned here were entered into “NVivo” research software and coded in order to assist with the handling of such diverse materials. Interpretation proceeded within a framework of relevant pastoral and theological issues suggested by the Chicago materials themselves, but also by my previous and ongoing observation of consolidated

² All names of communities and persons used in the paper have been changed. For verification and further research, a key to pseudonyms has been placed in the INSPIRE database as a document entitled “Milestone-Paper-Mergers-Clark-Key.”

parishes in New England,³ Germany,⁴ and Australia.⁵ Further perspectives are contributed by a growing national and international literature, such as John Seitz’s study of closed parishes in Boston, collected articles about an experiment in local pastoral teams in the Archdiocese of Poitiers, France, and materials published by Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership (a project funded by the same Lilly initiative as INSPIRE).⁶ The intended result of all this is a pastoral theological analysis of two specific merged parishes in the Chicago area that I hope not only draws from but can also contribute to a much broader discussion about local church communities in many different contexts.

One disclaimer regarding this method needs to be made: my descriptions of the two parishes are not intended in any way to be complete characterizations, nor predictions of the ultimate “success” or “failure” of any given parish model. Rather, I hope that the descriptions will provide a set of evocative “snap shots” that can serve to stimulate discussion of the many factors, values, and potential outcomes involved in the process of merging several once-separate local church communities. Ideally, this discussion, in turn, will point toward certain fundamental issues in the theological understanding of the Church in its most local manifestations.

The Cases

Two Styles of Parish Merger

The two cases examined in this paper present both great similarities in context and many differences in both procedures and results. Examined together with experiences of parish consolidation in other places, the differences suggest varying “styles” in the consolidation process. It may be useful here to consider two such styles that seem particularly relevant, before presenting the details of the two Chicago cases. Such categorization has its hazards. Distinguishing among “styles” is not, of course, about making legal distinctions. From a canonical point of view merged parishes are simply parishes, functioning like all others (except for duties such as retaining the records of former parishes whose territories they may have absorbed). Instead, “style” here refers to the pastoral and administrative strategies used to bring together several previously distinct communities. Examined in detail, these strategies are as numerous as the communities and leaders that apply them, but broad patterns do emerge from the many examples. Paying attention to the patterns can help us understand the pastoral goals and underlying assumptions that may have been operative in particular cases.

What could be called an “administrative style” focuses largely on issues such as efficiency, cost effectiveness, and the availability of personnel (especially priests). Adoption of this approach is often urged by various external pressures (lack of priests, aging infrastructure, financial struggles, dwindling membership, etc.) or even by certain theological preferences (for example,

³ Research in New England has included participant observation, interviews, and public presentations in the Archdiocese of Boston, the Diocese of Worcester, MA, the Diocese of Springfield, MA, the Diocese of Manchester, NH, and the Diocese of Portland, ME, between 2004 and 2013.

⁴ Research in Germany, in connection with the “Crossing Over” project (an exchange program of pastoral ministers between the Archdiocese of Chicago and several German dioceses) and the Ruhr Universität Bochum, has included observation and interviews in the Dioceses of Essen, Münster, and Hildesheim, in January 2012 and July 2013.

⁵ Research in Australia has included participant observation and interviews in the “Western Mission” of the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn in May 2009.

⁶ See the “Sources: Related Works” section at the end of this paper for references to these works.

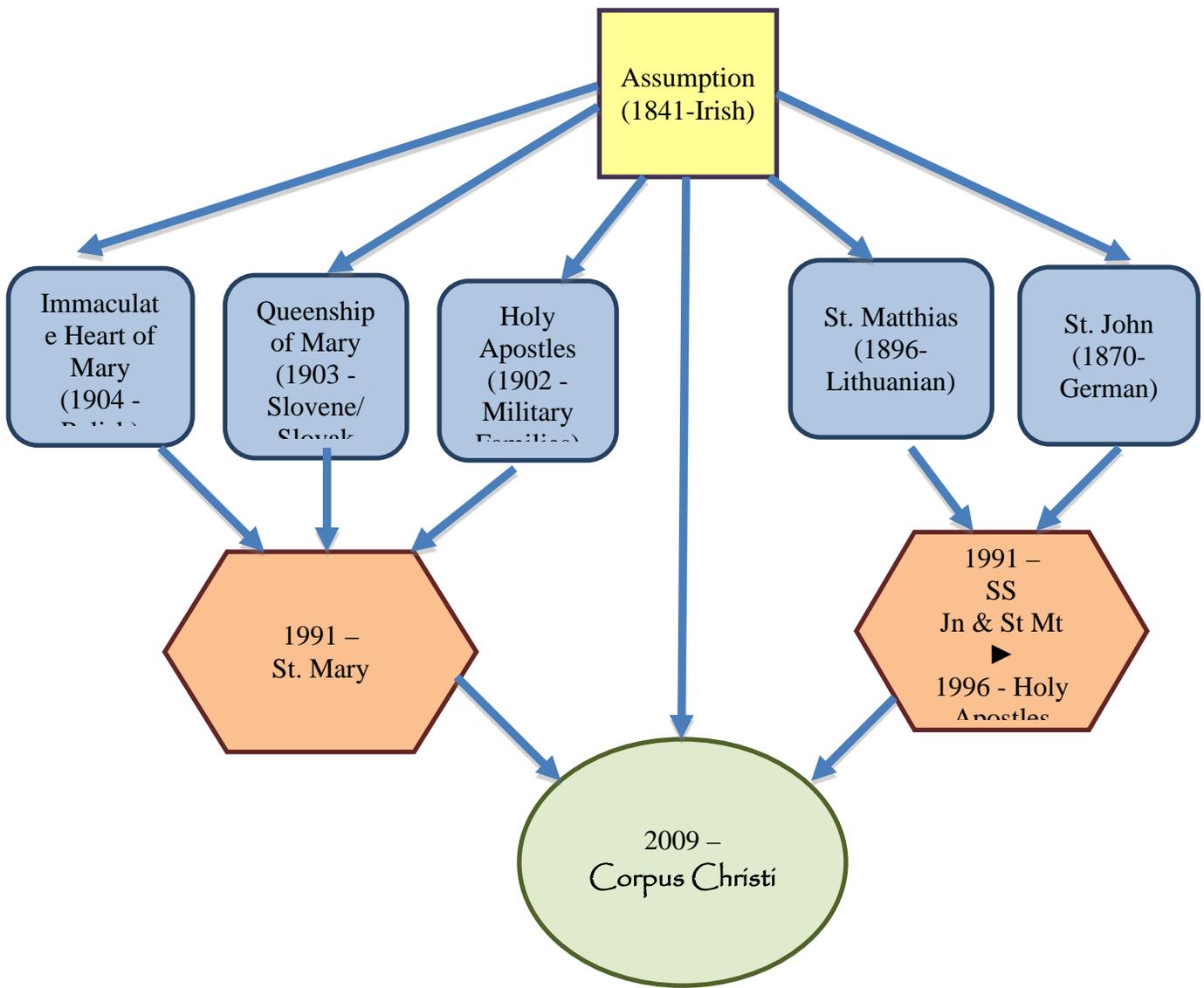
an emphasis on the understanding of “local church” as defined by bishop and diocese and corresponding de-emphasis on the status of parish communities). With this approach, decisions about both the merger and the subsequent organization of the new parish are likely to be made centrally and enacted quickly. Community input is not necessarily excluded; sometimes its importance is very well grasped. Generally, however, opportunities for that input will be quite carefully structured, limited, and controlled.

A “community style,” by contrast, acknowledges and engages the distinct community identity of each group within the parishes that are to merge. The process begins by developing a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of these groups and subgroups, and allows local circumstances to shape the ultimate strategy. If new forms of cooperation are determined to be beneficial they will be developed, as far as possible, with the active involvement of the communities themselves, in a way that allows for reaction and adjustment. Perhaps paradoxically, this openness to community input may be less formal and readily identifiable than the procedures constructed in the administrative style, since it works best when it unfolds slowly and becomes a general part of the local culture of the communities involved. It might be, as well, that the external pressures and preferences that urge the choice of an administrative style are present here as well. Ecclesologically, however, the community style responds to those pressures by retaining its high value on the local community, whether understood as an essential resource for the diocesan church or as a manifestation of church in its own right.

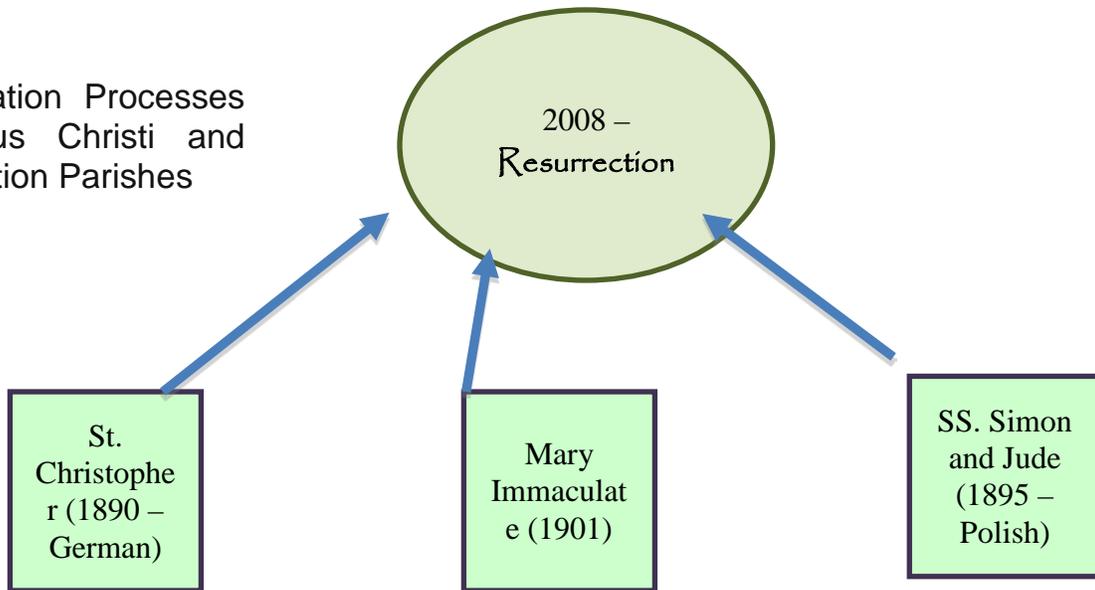
Two Similar Parishes

Although Resurrection and Corpus Christi parishes are located in quite different regions of the archdiocese, similarities between them are quite striking. In both cases, a merger process completed within the last five years brought together three formerly separate parishes, each rooted in a different ethnic European community. Each of the two new parishes now operate with three worship sites, but with one set of parish offices located at one of the former parish rectories. In both cases, the first pastor of the merged parish was a member of a religious order, and lived in another of the available rectory buildings with a small community of other priests who provided assistance in the parish. Many of the other parish buildings are used as social service centers of one kind or another. Most significantly, the large majority of the parish population in both of these merged parishes is now made up of Spanish-speaking Catholics. Masses are offered in both Spanish and English, with some accommodation to a dwindling Polish-speaking population in both cases.

Despite these outward similarities, however, the differences between the two parishes are quite stark. The merging process at Corpus Christi can be quite easily identified with the community style, and that at Resurrection with the administrative approach. The basic distinguishing features can be described here; I will provide further details as the discussion unfolds in later sections of the paper. The following chart offers a visualization of the sequence and merger processes that erected each parish.



Consolidation Processes at Corpus Christi and Resurrection Parishes



“Corpus Christi”

Corpus Christi, which now includes both urban and suburban neighborhoods, was formed from the territory of what had once been six separate parishes. In 1991, an earlier round of closures in that area of the archdiocese had reduced five of these parishes to two. The three parishes that then remained – “Assumption,” “Holy Apostles,” and “St. Mary” – cooperated on a consolidated school. In 2006 “Father M,” the pastor of Holy Apostles for the previous ten years, was appointed pastor of Assumption and St. Mary as well. He had already helped lead Holy Apostles through its own difficult merger and onto a spacious new campus, and had either established or strengthened several highly visible social ministry projects, using buildings made available by the earlier mergers.⁷ He had worked closely for several years with another priest, “Father G,” who, like himself, had extensive experience in Latin America and used the concept of *comunidades de base* (base, or basic, Christian communities) to connect with the rapidly growing Latino population of the area.⁸

In 2009, after three years of operation as what was called a “united Catholic community,”⁹ the three parishes were officially merged as Corpus Christi, a single parish with three worship sites. Offices were located at Holy Apostles, and both the school and the priests’ residence at Assumption. A new pastor, “Father T,” was appointed, a member of a religious congregation who also arrived with a great deal of pastoral experience in Latin America. He caused some initial consternation among the staff by making a number of swift administrative changes and establishing his own control of the whole enterprise. Ultimately, though, he did not redirect parish energies so much as build on what had already been accomplished. He remained with the newly merged parish for three years, living and working with several international priests. Father T was replaced as pastor in 2012 by an archdiocesan priest who continues in that position today.¹⁰

“Resurrection”

The merger process at Resurrection was much less protracted. Three parishes, originally built within a few blocks of each other by different European ethnic communities in the same urban neighborhood, faced pastor transitions at about the same time. “St. Christopher” had recently received a resident pastor after a long period without one. The pastor at “Mary Immaculate” was nearing the end of his second six-year term, and had recently added responsibility for “SS. Simon and Jude” when its pastor departed. The regional bishop opened the discussion of a possible merger late in 2006, in meetings that over the course of a year came to include five representatives of each parish. During 2007, a religious congregation took responsibility for SS. Simon and Jude and sent a small community of priests and students to live and work there. One of them, “Father D,” was asked to serve as pastor for the merged parish, and took over that position in July of 2008.¹¹ At the end of six years in the neighborhood, Father D and his

⁷ Meeting with “Father M,” field notes, April 20, 2012 (hereafter cited as “Father M,” 4/20/12’).

⁸ Interview with “Father G,” transcript, March 19, 2012 (hereafter cited as “Father G,” 3/19/12’).

⁹ “Corpus Christi School” website, July 2013 (text from 2009, no longer accessible).

¹⁰ Meeting with “Father T,” field notes, October 30, 2011 (hereafter cited as “Father T,” 10/30/11’); Interview with “Consultant 2,” transcript, March 22, 2012 (hereafter cited as “Consultant 2,” 3/22/12’); Interview with “Father T,” transcript, December 6, 2012 (hereafter cited as “Father T,” 12/6/12’).

¹¹ Meeting with “Father D,” field notes, November 13, 2011 (hereafter cited as “Father D,” 11/13/11’); Meeting with “Deacon C,” field notes, December 16, 2011 (hereafter cited as “Deacon C,” 12/16/11’); Interview with “Consultant 1,” transcript, March 22, 2012 (hereafter cited as “Consultant 1,” 3/22/12’).

congregation left the parish and were replaced by two archdiocesan priests, pastor and assistant, who are currently in their first year of serving the parish.¹²

Despite significant maintenance and fund-raising issues, all three churches at Resurrection have remained opened. As of the beginning of 2013 the rectories at both SS. Simon and Jude and St. Christopher were in use as residences for priests, and the one at Mary Immaculate served as the combined parish offices. The convents and schools had largely found other purposes, mostly for educational and social services by outside agencies. Despite this repurposing of physical plant, and a great deal of energy and tension around issues of shared staffing and Mass schedules, the former parishes have so far retained many of the marks of separate church communities. Each has a somewhat different relationship to the now dominant Latino population of the neighborhood, and SS. Simon and Jude retains important ties to a rapidly diminishing Polish-speaking group. Events and projects that were important to the individual parishes are now advertised and opened to the whole community, but there remains a tendency for people to stay close to their former parishes. A number of formerly regular parishioners now quite pointedly attend Mass outside the neighborhood, while continuing to think of themselves as parishioners of one of the previous parishes. (This group is estimated by one deacon at between fifty and seventy-five persons, certainly not a large percentage of the membership.)¹³

Evaluating the Cases: Four Salient Factors

Although my own preferences among the various approaches taken in these two cases will become clear, evaluating them is not a matter of choosing one of them to be an exclusive model for the future. Two constants of local ecclesiology dictate against that approach. First, each local community has its characteristic identity within the larger reality of the Church. As many similarities as these two new parishes have, they remain particular communities with unique combinations of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. Responses that have proved pastorally useful in one location would not necessarily transfer successfully into the circumstances of the other. Second, those characteristic identities have a narrative quality. Because the history of each parish is continually unfolding, there is every reason to believe that the experience of “success” in both stories will continue to ebb and flow. What appear at this point as particularly dynamic features of one community may stall for lack of leadership or resources, or may develop in less favorable ways in the future. Likewise, favorable aspects that have so far remained hidden behind more obvious flaws may emerge as the situations mature. The point of the analysis, therefore, cannot be to identify any one factor as *the* key, nor any single approach as *the* best policy. Yet, the stories of these two mergers may allow us to reflect profitably on the nature of some crucial elements in the life of parish communities, on the ways they might be affected by different pastoral approaches, and on how we understand parish communities in general.

There are many ways, of course, to characterize the differences between the two parishes, but the study suggests four factors that stand out as distinguishing the different strategies used at Resurrection and Corpus Christi. They are *process*, *pastoral leadership*, *community identity*, and *social ministry*. Together, these four areas go a long way toward explaining the very different perceptions of the merger in the two parishes.

¹² “Resurrection Parish” website, August 2013.

¹³ “Deacon C,” 12/16/12.

Process

The most striking differences between the processes followed in the two cases are their *timelines* and their methods of *engagement* of the laity. In these areas, they continue to demonstrate the community and administrative styles.

The changes in the parishes that would become Corpus Christi began to unfold slowly as much as twenty years before the official merger. As early as the mid-1980's, five of the six original parishes were sharing sponsorship of a regional Catholic elementary school. By 1991, three of those five parishes merged as St. Mary, and the other two, while retaining the joint name "SS. John and Matthias" and continuing to use both church buildings, also became a single canonical parish. In 1996, Father M took over as pastor at SS. John and Matthias, and soon led them in the process of choosing a new name, Holy Apostles. Not until 2002 was the unification completed with the move to new worship space large enough for the entire community. In the meantime, cooperation across the remaining parish lines continued to grow, including the relocation of the consolidated school to Assumption Parish. By 2006, the vacancy of two of the three pastorates at the same time allowed for the penultimate move, and Father M assumed leadership of all three parishes. Only with his departure in 2009 did the fully merged Corpus Christi Parish finally come into existence, eighteen years after the mergers that created St. Mary and Holy Apostles.¹⁴

This slow, organic growth toward a new community organization usually provided little formal engagement of the parishioners in planning, deliberations, and decision-making. Father M reports that the parish councils of St. John and St. Matthias had met together about the merger of their two parishes only once in 1991 – for the coin toss by which the unremarkable name "SS. John and Matthias" was chosen! But formal consultation is only one approach to lay engagement. As pastor at Holy Apostles, Father M was deeply "inspired" by a predecessor's "love for the people," and his own efforts to connect with them brought him, over time, an extraordinary degree of recognition and support, in both the parish and the wider community. To build up those relationships, he made use of existing councils and committees, parish social gatherings of all sorts, and numerous social ministry projects. He was also very supportive of the new "small Christian communities" being developed by Father G's "area ministry" across several parishes, which were helping many Spanish-speaking immigrants find a genuine and ongoing relationship with the church in their new home.¹⁵

Father M became pastor of all three still-separate parishes via an administrative procedure that he describes as "continuing to do what I was doing all along."¹⁶ Mostly, that meant continuing to engage people in his attentive pastoral way. Even while moving toward ever-greater integration of the parishes' activities and services, he was careful to make use of all three campuses – and many of the buildings of the older closed parishes – as much as possible. When Father T succeeded him in 2009, although he was considerably more attentive to structures and procedures, a similar priority of keeping all the parishioners connected continued to bear fruit in an atmosphere of optimistic engagement.

¹⁴ "Father M," 4/20/12.

¹⁵ "Father M," 4/20/12; "Father G," 3/19/12.

¹⁶ "Father M," 4/20/12.

The administrative style employed at Resurrection simply did not leave time to cultivate the kinds of strong parish relationships from which Corpus Christi benefited. When the merger took place in 2008, with only a bit more than a year of public preparation, St. Christopher, SS. Simon and Jude, and Mary Immaculate had no previous history of cooperation, and all three were in the midst of important pastor transitions. St. Christopher did have about two years to get acquainted with, and respond very positively to, their first pastor in eight years (coincidentally, the same Father G who had worked with the Latino community at Corpus Christi). SS. Simon and Jude, on the other hand, after sharing Mary Immaculate's pastor for a time, had only a few months to negotiate the transition from a single diocesan priest to a community of religious before the new pastor took the reins of the whole merged parish. Mary Immaculate had to say farewell to their long-time pastor just when a familiar face might have been most helpful.

Procedurally, on the other hand, Resurrection had a somewhat clearer experience than Corpus Christi. The initiative for the merger came from the regional bishop, who saw the potential for a unified pastoral approach to the growing Latino population.¹⁷ The process that he began in 2006 had about four phases. The first phase brought the bishop together with the priests and deacons to consider the possibility of a merger. The second phase, in early 2007, saw the inclusion of staff members and other active parishioners in the discussion. By late 2007, when it was generally known that a merger was being planned, each of the three communities sent a delegation of five to discuss the practical implementation. The Archdiocese in the meantime reached a staffing agreement with Father D's religious congregation, who arrived at SS. Simon and Jude in the summer of 2007. After attending only the last few planning meetings, Father D was asked to take on the pastorate of the merged parish, which he did in July 2008. During the subsequent five years, Father D worked with staff members and representative councils to find practical ways of making the merged parish function as a unified community.¹⁸

It is significant that those with whom I have discussed this process all locate responsibility for it outside of their own place in the structure. The cardinal, the regional bishop, the departing pastor of Mary Immaculate, and Father D's provincial have all been mentioned as "part authors" of the plan. Those actually present at Resurrection, however, seems reluctant to own the process, regardless of how they now view the eventual outcome. It is also important that the initial discussions took place exclusively among the clergy. In addition to reflecting a particular underlying ecclesiology, this may also have been viewed as a practical necessity, in order to lessen the likelihood of immediate conflict among parishioners and produce a plan that could then be more widely discussed. Indeed, experience elsewhere suggests that forums created with the specific – or poorly concealed – purpose of leading toward structural change in parishes tend to bring people together in a highly defensive mood. This was certainly borne out at Resurrection in the later stages of the process, even with open discussion limited to a committee of five from each parish.¹⁹

The greater formality of Resurrection's administrative process served the purpose of making and executing the decision to merge the parishes, but it left virtually all of the deeper work of pastoral integration undone. Father D thus faced the task of trying to secure the trust and

¹⁷ "Deacon C," 12/16/11; "Father G," 3/19/12.

¹⁸ "Father D," 11/13/11; "Deacon C," 12/16/11; "Father G," 3/19/12.

¹⁹ "Deacon C," 12/16/11.

cooperation of three communities that were not used to working together. Simultaneously, he still had to work out naturally contentious practical issues such as Mass schedule and staff restructuring. Though there has clearly been some progress toward a parish-wide identity in the past five years, there remains a prevailing sense of *fragmentation* at Resurrection. It is attested to by the difficulty of getting from key informants a clear and consistent overview of the current life of the parish, and by parish bulletins and web pages that seem self-consciously preoccupied with the theme of parish unity in a way that would be unnecessary if it were already a part of the culture of the communities. In sum, the formal process was not designed, and subsequently did not prove adequate; to keep the people deeply engaged in an ongoing process of community-building.

The observable result of the two different styles of merger seems to have been that the parishioners and leaders of Corpus Christi enjoyed time to accustom themselves to the very idea of a merged parish, while they wrestled with its practical implications a little bit at a time. This may have helped form an atmosphere of optimism and confidence in the parish – the sense that the change experienced in the community is a kind of continuous progress. On the other hand, parishioners of Resurrection and their leaders have been confronted with the full range of problems all at once, after the merger became fact, and have often since had the feeling that the change they face is a sort of onslaught that needs to be battled. A defensive attitude prevails.

Pastoral Leadership

Differences in process may be as much a matter of circumstances as they are of deliberate strategy. Nonetheless, the cases make clear that systems and styles of leadership are revealed and tested in the midst of evolving situations.

Far from operating as consensus-driven facilitators, the archdiocesan and local clerical leadership was very active in the development of Corpus Christi Parish, and undoubtedly even seemed “arbitrary” and “dictatorial” to some parishioners at various points in the long evolution of that merger.²⁰ Yet, from early on, there was also a deliberate effort at community development, through both the social ministries and the basic Christian communities, inspired and sustained largely by the extensive Latin American pastoral experience of Father M, Father G, and Father T. Community development, however, could only be truly successful in an atmosphere of general collaboration among the several parishes and their pastors, staffs, parishioners, volunteers and donors. When the final consolidation of Corpus Christi took place, therefore, what had been built in the whole cluster over the previous twenty years was inherited by the merged parish. Respected and developed, this heritage was neither abandoned as part of “the past,” nor left to be fiercely defended by an embattled faction.

The story of leadership at Resurrection, on the other hand, often seems to collapse into the story of one person, Father D. A likely reason for this is that the decision to merge was an external administrative one that preceded the building of any of the collaborative structures and habits that would be needed to make the merger successful. Parishioners were largely absent from real participation in the decision to merge. Meanwhile, Father D faced pressure to take on the pastorate, despite lack of both parish experience and facility in Spanish.²¹ He had already been

²⁰ “Consultant 2,” 3/22/12; “Father T,” 12/6/12.

²¹ “Father D,” 11/13/11; “Deacon C,” 12/16/11.

given another full time job by his religious congregation, to oversee the formation of the theology students, and to be a spokesman and vocations promoter for the order; this assignment was not changed. It is no surprise that he reported a constant sense of being overwhelmed by urgent demands, and was simply unable to take advantage of available assistance for building a collaborative team ministry. As a result, a sense of fragmentation persisted at Resurrection, in the staff and in the parish as a whole. Only as the time approached for him to step down after five years did some staff members comment that their relationship with Father D had “begun to gel.”²²

These enormous differences in approach to leadership, in play on both the individual and systemic levels, can be further illustrated by the handling of certain key issues in the merging of parishes which are both naturally contentious and unavoidable. Changes in liturgical schedules, for example, are inherently problematic. For many parishioners Mass times, locations, and styles are not just matters of convenience and taste but also highly charged symbols of connection to the physical space, relationships between faith and work, family and community, and other essential elements of life. Clergy often characterize such problems as parishioners’ unreasonable attachment to their preferences and routines. Yet, often enough, parishioners see the preferences and routines of clergy becoming the deciding factor instead. At Resurrection, the Mass schedule remained in flux for some time after the merger, in part because of the temporary availability of priests (a former pastor, resident students, etc.) to preside at certain Masses. Some other decisions, such as the replacement of a Spanish Mass at Mary Immaculate with an evening “youth Mass” in English,²³ were based on hopes for the future rather than on careful public consideration of the community’s needs. The result was a Mass schedule that changed unevenly – more at one church than at the other two, retaining accommodations to a much diminished Polish-speaking minority while continuing to underrepresent the Spanish-speaking majority, and so forth. It was not surprising that in some of the interviews suspicion was voiced of undue influence by certain favored parishioners and staff members.²⁴ Such whisperings further demonstrate the inability of Resurrection’s administrative style to generate an effective level of communication among various subgroups in the parish.

By the same token there were, to be sure, dwindling ethnic groups who were not at all happy with the slow erosion of their influence at what became Corpus Christi.²⁵ In that parish, however, a sense of forward movement toward a discernible new community identity took hold over the much longer unfolding of the merger. That optimism seems to have encouraged a charitable willingness on the parts of the various groups, parishioners and clergy alike, to adjust to one another’s needs. The result has been a three-site parish with a worship schedule that preserves a particular, though evolving, character for each church, is appropriately balanced between Spanish and English liturgies, and which even continues to accommodate the small Polish community with a monthly liturgy.²⁶

²² “Consultant 1,” 3/22/12.

²³ “Deacon C,” 12/16/11.

²⁴ “Consultant 1,” 3/22/12.

²⁵ “Father M,” 4/20/12.

²⁶ “Father T,” 10/30/11.

Staff reorganization is another typical point of contention in parish mergers. As the arriving pastor at the newly-created Corpus Christi parish, Father T prioritized a more efficient operation of the increasingly complex administration. This new focus precipitated a crisis when Father T asked for the resignation of a staff member who had been Father M's "right-hand," causing a great deal of insecurity in the remaining staff. As an INSPIRE consultant described it, "They were concerned for their jobs."²⁷ Yet, with help from the consultant and the INSPIRE process, Father T and his reshaped staff were able to settle into a more productive relationship. As he became more convinced that an atmosphere of cooperative trust was worth the time and discomfort involved in building habits of communication, Father T became more available to the process.²⁸

At Resurrection, ironically, the quick and "efficient" creation of the merged parish led to some serious administrative problems. Father D seemed intent on avoiding confrontation, and had difficulty sorting through the conflicting reactions of staff members to one another. Consequently, for a long time the staff remained a patchwork from the previous parishes with factions tending to "protect their own." Real changes in staff positions were left until serious breaking-points were reached, and the changes brought even more conflict. In one instance, objections were raised to one staff member's lack of training for the job she held; her title was changed to another area in which she had little experience, and she continued with more or less what she had been doing. In another instance, a staffer reportedly wrote a long and scathing letter of dismissal for another staffer when the pastor "could not find the time to do it." Unfortunately, at Resurrection INSPIRE, though officially active, was viewed as a "luxury" for which the urgent circumstances allowed no time. No sustained attempt was made to address the need for improved communication and collaboration on the staff.²⁹

Community Identity

If encouraging collaboration is an important measure of leadership in a parish merger, we are thus pointed toward the role of the community itself. How do the parishioners' own local culture, assets, and patterns of association, their expectations and concerns, contribute to the process? To do justice to such questions would, of course, require a thorough sociological analysis far beyond the scope or intentions of this study. We can, however, find a starting point for further thought and discussion in the two cases at hand, beginning with recognizing the limits of our ordinary idea of "parish community."

The original parishes in the neighborhoods now served by Corpus Christi and Resurrection were of the European ethnic type that flourished in the U.S. especially in the century between 1850 and 1950. For over fifty years, a different parish model has been asserting itself in much of Catholicism, shaped in a world of suburbs and of less coherent urban neighborhoods. The suburban model has encouraged a general habit of thinking in terms of "worship communities" that form around a parish and rely heavily on parish leadership and programming for their

²⁷ "Consultant 2," 3/22/12.

²⁸ "Father T," 12/6/12.

²⁹ "Consultant 1," 3/22/12.

coherence.³⁰ But this approach can cause us to lose track of an important dimension of the earlier model: it was not parish ministry that created the old ethnic communities. Rather, the parishes were *created for* (and in many ways *by*) those immigrant communities for their own spiritual well-being. In many instances, ethnic communities that became assimilated into the new suburban reality left behind small remnants in the old neighborhoods who often found one of their last cultural refuges in the parish churches. To welcome many new neighbors into an urban parish, especially when they heralded the arrival of a new dominant ethnic group, has often not been an easy task. What may be even more difficult, however, is for the parish as an institution to find the balance between its own responsibility for building a worship community and its humble recognition of the community (or communities) that already exists all around and within it.

Pastoral leaders at Corpus Christi recognized the shifting demographics of their neighborhoods as a direct concern of the parish and responded accordingly. At SS. John and Matthias, Father M knew that he had to meet the various sub-communities of the parish where they actually were, socially, economically, and in their attitudes toward church in general and the new merged community in particular.³¹ The parish took up enthusiastically the advocacy and assistance work that was so greatly needed among the new immigrants.³² It was tremendously important, as well, that all the parishes of what became Corpus Christi hosted together Father G's ministry of building up base communities within the Latino community; these contributed not only to the strengthening of participants' ties to the church in the area, but to the vitality of the Latino community in general and to that community's shared identity across all the neighborhoods.³³

Father M's consistent aim, nonetheless, was to encourage cooperation among *all* the ethnic groups, and he worked diligently to bring the Spanish-speaking community that had begun to establish itself at St. John together with the Anglo communities in his combined parish. At St. Matthias, a diminishing Lithuanian community had continued with a Mass in their mother tongue for a long time after the merger with St. John, and Father M tried, not entirely successfully, to prepare for what he saw as their inevitable loss of viability. He reminded them of their own immigrant roots, and tried to help them see the similarities between that history and the situation of the arriving Latino population. On the other hand, he also spoke to the active Spanish-speakers about managing their own, and their children's, assimilation into American culture by being careful not to equate the practice of faith entirely with the speaking of Spanish, in order to avoid the fate of some earlier ethnic communities who managed to make an almost self-fulfilling prophecy of the adage, "Those who lose their language lose their faith."³⁴

The search for a workable equilibrium took on ritual expression when it was recognized that the double parish had grown beyond the two small and aging churches (St. Matthias and St. John) which the Holy Apostles community had been using. A newer and larger facility was purchased

³⁰ The history of US parish development is presented in many well-known volumes, such as Jay P. Dolan, et al., *Transforming Parish Ministry* (Crossroad, 1989); and James Coriden, *The Parish In Catholic Tradition* (Paulist, 1996).

³¹ "Father M," 4/20/12.

³² Meeting with "Corpus Christi Community Services Staff," transcript, March 26, 2012 (hereafter cited as "Community Services Staff," 3/26/12).

³³ "Father G," 3/19/12.

³⁴ "Father M," 4/20/12.

from an evangelical church in a nearby but more suburban neighborhood. The move to the new space was accompanied by community discussions and a ritual of leave-taking from the two older buildings. The sub-communities who identified with each of those churches processed separately toward the new one, and were met there by a third group of more recently arrived parishioners – mostly Latinos – who preferred to identify only with the new unified community. The new location included a rectory, office space, and a parish center, but the older campuses were, for the most part, retained for use by social ministry projects associated with the parish.³⁵

By the time of the final merger at Corpus Christi, the painful transitions away from earlier ethnic customs and language toward new ones had largely been completed. Most of the several Eastern European communities of the original parishes had faded, including even the Lithuanians. The Poles at St. Mary are now the lone survivors of that earlier era, still able to celebrate a Mass in their own language once a month, in the church that their families built. Meanwhile, many years after Father G's multi-parish work with *comunidades de base*, the dynamic Spanish-speaking majority can be seen as a self-sustaining community that in important ways preceded the parish which is now its spiritual home. The Latino community in the neighborhoods served by Corpus Christi has a definite character and recognizable identity, of which many of its own members, as well as outside observers, are well aware.³⁶ This identity is based on many elements, of course, but among them would be shared ethnic culture (the Spanish speakers being largely of Mexican descent, as at Resurrection), the experience of recent immigration, ongoing economic challenges, and certainly a foundation of cultural Catholicism. Although such a community does not need to be invented and held in existence by the parish as an institution, it has formed a vital link to the ministry that nourishes its spiritual coherence and advances its material well-being.

Resurrection Parish was hampered by the circumstances of its merger from taking the same kind of approach to community development as had been taken at Corpus Christi. At the time of their consolidation, the three parishes at Resurrection each seem to have been in a certain state of flux with regard to their community identities, hesitating between former ethnic ties and the realities of a changing neighborhood. St. Christopher, founded by German immigrants whose descendants had long since assimilated into the English-speaking mainstream, was in the early stages of a sort of “merger” of its own: Father G had arrived after the long period without a resident priest, and began immediately to make use of the base community strategy that he had used so effectively at Corpus Christi, in an attempt to bring the English and Spanish-speaking communities into a shared parish identity at St. Christopher.³⁷ Mary Immaculate parish, originally predominantly Irish, was perhaps a few steps back in a similar process, having a separate Spanish Mass³⁸ and a youth ministry that reached out to Latino teens, but not yet the Anglo-Latino cooperation that Father G was introducing. SS. Simon and Jude was facing a more complex situation; traditionally Polish, it had a considerable but clearly diminishing number of members (themselves now primarily English-speaking) who actively defended old parish

³⁵ “Father M,” 4/20/12.

³⁶ Meeting with “Researcher” (doctoral student familiar with social welfare agencies in the Corpus Christi neighborhood), field notes, March 14, 2012; Meeting with “Volunteers 1 and 2” (participant in one-year college-grad program of community service work and communal life), field notes, January 26, 2012 (hereafter cited as “Volunteer [X],” 1/26/12’).

³⁷ “Father G,” 3/19/12.

³⁸ “Deacon C,” 12/16/11.

traditions.³⁹ The main Sunday morning Mass there still uses Polish for one reading, at least one hymn, and various prayers, including the Lord's Prayer.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, a "Spanish Mass community" had formed at SS. Simon and Jude before the merger as well. In all three, then, of the original parishes that would become Resurrection, the European communities were just beginning – and in quite different ways – to come to terms with the fact that they were no longer the majority group, nor even the most active. Neither, on the other hand, had the Latino, mostly Mexican, majority begun to recognize itself as a single community across the territory of all three parishes.⁴¹ There were thus not merely three but as many as seven separate sub-communities, including the Polish group, identifying themselves by language and original parish.

These groups did not yet have a realistic appreciation even of their own situations and interrelationships, let alone a vision of a united, cooperative parish community. The only notes of collaboration among them prior to the announcement of the merger had come in Father G's fruitful but incomplete efforts at St. Christopher, in the brief experience of shared pastorate between Mary Immaculate and SS. Simon and Jude, and in the substantial (if not total) overlap of the English and Polish-speaking groups there. When the merger took place, a palpably defensive mood prevailed throughout the new parish,⁴² and Father D, the beleaguered first pastor, did what he could to "keep the peace." He did not, by any means, ignore the issue of community development, however. He invited the continuation of INSPIRE (which had begun at St. Christopher before the merger), as well as allowing the spread of Father G's base communities to other parts of the parish. He was also enthusiastic about a program in leadership for Latino Catholics and about Resurrection being chosen for the first round of the Archdiocese's "Parish Transformation" project.⁴³ All of these efforts offered, with greater or lesser effectiveness, tools for community development, and provided a series of very positive gatherings and workshops remembered with approval by key informants.⁴⁴ Therein, however, lies both the value and the difficulty: leadership and community-building are reported at Resurrection as a series of events sponsored by the parish, rather than movement toward a strategy of coming to understand, support, and work within the neighborhood and its constituent communities.

Taken together, these contrasting cases suggest that the two parishes have diverged significantly in their ability to engage the social realities of their constituent communities, as opposed to focusing more exclusively on internal issues of the parish institution. Engagement of the type that Corpus Christi developed offered the church an important place in the thick web of institutions, patterns, relationships and services that strengthen the community at large and in that way build a stronger foundation for the parish community itself. An internal focus, on the other hand, even one intended to calm fears and bring about cooperation as at Resurrection, can also have the effect of keeping the community focused on old perceptions and issues of diminishing relevance to parishioners' ordinary lives. With all its attention focused inward, the

³⁹ "Deacon C," 12/16/11.

⁴⁰ Observation of liturgy, "SS. Simon and Jude," field notes, November 13, 2011, and December 10, 2011.

⁴¹ "Deacon C," 12/16/11; "Father G," 3/19/12.

⁴² "Deacon C," 12/16/11.

⁴³ "Father D," 11/13/11; "Consultant 1," 3/22/12.

⁴⁴ "Father D," 11/13/11; "Deacon C," 12/16/11; "Father G," 3/19/12; Conversation with "Consultant 1," field notes, July 31, 2013 (hereafter cited as "'Consultant 1,' 7/31/13').

parish is distracted from the real needs of its people and can actually see shared community become a more elusive goal.

Social Ministry

The “real needs” of parishioners, of course, are many and varied, and also very much a matter of perspective. However, the recognition that parish communities live within a thick context, that can greatly affect shared perceptions of the Church and its relevance, also points us toward the works of charity and justice as the fourth “salient factor” in the evaluation of the Corpus Christi and Resurrection mergers. The United States Bishops’ 1993 statement “Communities of Salt and Light” (CSL) on the social mission of the parish stated, “In responding to the Scriptures and the principles of Catholic social teaching, parishes are not called to an extra or added dimension of our faith, but to a central demand of Catholic life and evangelization.”⁴⁵ Charles Curran’s more recent discussion of the topic goes further to describe the parish as “the central place to carry out the social mission of the church.”⁴⁶ Such statements suggest that attention to social ministry in merged parishes is not only a strategy for strengthening a parish’s presence to the community at large, but also an important marker of the vitality of the parish itself as a Christian community. CSL warned that “social ministry not genuinely rooted in prayer can easily burn itself out. On the other hand, worship that does not reflect the Lord’s call to conversion, service, and justice can become pious ritual and empty of the gospel.”⁴⁷ The bishops write of “a strategy of integration and collaboration,”⁴⁸ encouraging all members of the parish to think in terms of the centrality of the social mission to the life of the parish precisely as a community of faith. The emergence of such an approach is both a positive indication of the gains that a merger may already have made, and support for the ongoing development of a shared parish identity.

This was the observable situation at Corpus Christi. Its network of community services had been inherited largely, but not entirely, from the work done by numerous donors and enthusiastic volunteers encouraged by Father M at Holy Apostles in the ten years before he assumed the shared pastorate. Each aspect of the work had its own particular beginnings, advocates, sponsors, and target clientele, but every project responded to an evident need in the poor and largely immigrant population of the parish. Among the projects were traditional charitable offerings of direct assistance, including a soup kitchen, a food pantry, and a clothes closet. Substantial funding, management skills, goods and labor were provided by dedicated parishioners, members of other “sharing parishes” linked to Holy Apostles through a regular archdiocesan program, and concerned individuals from nearby affluent communities.⁴⁹ When Holy Apostles moved to its new suburban location, most of the buildings of the former St. Matthias parish were converted for use by the community services. The former St. John parish campus was turned over to a new high school, independent of the parish but serving the

⁴⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), “Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections On The Social Mission Of The Parish,” Statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: USCC, 1994), heading 3, section 1. Accessed August 9, 2013 at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/communities-of-salt-and-light-reflections-on-the-social-mission-of-the-parish.cfm#integration>.

⁴⁶ Charles Curran, *The Social Mission of the U.S. Catholic Church: A Theological Perspective* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 134.

⁴⁷ NCCB, “Salt and Light,” heading 3, section 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, heading 3, section 2.

⁴⁹ “Father T,” 10/30/11; “Corpus Christi Community Services Staff,” 3/26/12; “Father M,” 4/20/12.

immigrant population under broad Catholic sponsorship.⁵⁰ Former members of these communities could see that many of their well-loved parish buildings were still playing important roles in a dynamically expanding ministry.

In the meantime, Father M grew more and more involved in advocacy for the immigrant community across an increasing array of problems and issues, and was interested in doing more to help the long-term prospects of immigrant families. An Immigration Center therefore emerged to provide services such as legal aid, assistance with residency applications, and classes in English as a second language. The growing number of services provided and clients served attracted the attention of other agencies and even local government, seeking various cooperative arrangements with the parish. By this means, an overnight shelter was established in a former parish school by a regional agency that runs a number of such facilities.⁵¹

Development of the programs continued after the final merger, under Father T. The jointly-run Catholic grade school, already relocated to Assumption, became a major focus of the new pastor's attention. Other programs were bolstered with additional grants and new administrative hires. The continuing interconnection of community, parish, and social ministry was demonstrated by the inauguration of new longer-term emergency shelter projects. Discussion began about the possibility of moving the new high school from the former St. John site to open land adjacent to the relocated Holy Apostles church.⁵² Despite fears raised by the overhaul of staff and administrative policies (including the departure of Father M's business manager and the careful separation of parish finances from community service accounts) Father T remained fully engaged in Corpus Christi's commitments to the community. The social mission still commanded a huge share of staff time, financial resources, parish web pages and Sunday bulletins, and was seen by many as one of the primary reasons for the parish's very existence.⁵³ This understanding aided a very tight connection between the liturgical and diaconal aspects of church life that could be seen both in the style of the liturgies and the content of the preaching at all three of Corpus Christi's worship sites.⁵⁴

Resurrection Parish has not yet articulated anything parallel to the joint service mission that is so central to Corpus Christi. The prior lack of any formal collaboration, and the circumstances of the merger itself, made difficult any sense of shared parish identity or mission beyond the immediate demands of physical plant, finances, and administration. Suddenly faced with three aging campuses, Father D tended to see the several unused buildings less with an eye toward ministry and more as potential sources of rental income, or maintenance headaches, or both. At least one, the SS. Simon and Jude convent, was allowed to stand empty. The St. Christopher convent houses a community of post-college volunteers, nearly all of whom work in projects elsewhere in the city. The schools at St. Christopher and SS. Simon and Jude have been leased

⁵⁰ "Volunteers 1 and 2," 1/26/12; Christo Rey is an intensive cooperative/internship model for high school education for disadvantaged students, pioneered by Chicago Jesuits and their collaborators and now shared by a nation-wide network of institutions.

⁵¹ "Corpus Christi Community Services Staff," 3/26/12.

⁵² "Father T," 10/30/11; "Volunteers 1 and 2," 1/26/12.

⁵³ Meeting with "Administrator 1" (office staff member, Corpus Christi), field notes, March 28, 2012; "Consultant 2," 3/22/12.

⁵⁴ Observation of liturgies, "Holy Apostles," field notes, October 30, 2011 and May 18, 2013; "Assumption," field notes, December 4, 2011 and May 18, 2013; "St. Mary," field notes, December 11, 2011 and May 18, 2013.

to external educational programs. The “new” (1970's era) school at Mary Immaculate, used in part by the parish's religious education classes, is also home to an externally sponsored literacy program.⁵⁵

Two parish-sponsored social ministries, both located at Mary Immaculate, do get regular positive mention by key informants. A neighborhood youth ministry is housed in a portion of the original school, which once occupied the upper floors of the church building (a typical early-20th-century arrangement in Chicago). The youth center is an outreach which has been directed for many years by a Mary Immaculate parishioner who is something of a local legend for his knowledge of the neighborhood and care for the young people. The only one of the young adult volunteers from the community at St. Christopher's who actually works at Resurrection does so as a full time assistant to this director. The center offers an ongoing schedule of activities, which draw a modest group of “regulars,” as well as special events that attract a larger group of neighborhood youth, and programs such as retreats and field trips away from the neighborhood.⁵⁶ The other often-mentioned ministry is a modest food pantry, which is run from the parish offices in the former Mary Immaculate rectory. The office staff is responsible for responding to incoming food requests; a group of volunteers replenishes the stock and gains access for the parish to a local food bank by participating in the volunteer rotation there as well.⁵⁷ In these ways, steps are taken toward connecting the parish with some of the day-to-day needs and ordinary problems of the community at large.

Still, there is no sub-community at Resurrection that is ready to see itself as bridging all three worship sites, the way the Latinos have done at Corpus Christi. Each group tends to defend its former sense of identity and its traditional activities. These attitudes contribute to a strong impression of Resurrection as a number of separate “islands” of ministry, with participants trying to salvage those bits of activity with which they have been most familiar. Some of these traditions of mission do not appear to have kept pace with changes in the neighborhood, including even the recognition that Resurrection is in fact a predominantly Latino parish. This fragmentation may contribute to the greater sense of distance and relative lack of enthusiasm I experienced as a visitor to some of the ordinary liturgical celebrations at Resurrection.⁵⁸ In many ways, the parish gives the impression of having yet to understand its concrete situation and its need for a shared sense of purpose.

⁵⁵ “Father D,” 11/13/11; “Volunteer 3,” 1/26/12.

⁵⁶ “Volunteer 3,” 1/26/12; Meeting with “Volunteer 5,” field notes, March 14, 2012.

⁵⁷ “Deacon C,” 12-16-11.

⁵⁸ Observation of liturgies at “Mary Immaculate,” field notes, October 23, 2011, February 12, 2012, April 1, 2012, and April 28, 2013; “St. Christopher,” field notes, November 6, 2011 and November 27, 2011; “SS. Simon and Jude,” field notes, November 13, 2011, December 10, 2011, and February 5, 2012.

INSPIRE and the Merged Parish

What concrete role did Project INSPIRE play in the stories of these merged parishes, and what do these cases suggest about the strengths and weaknesses of the INSPIRE approach to developing parish pastoral teams? INSPIRE's original mandate from the Lilly Endowment's "Sustaining Pastoral Excellence" initiative was to work with "excellent" parish staffs and help them develop team cultures that would carry their strengths into the future. But parish merger situations clearly provide a "limit case" for this type of collaborative work. The established team "chemistry" is significantly altered as the purpose, mission, and function of the staff undergoes serious transformation, all in the midst and on behalf of a parish community that is also experiencing massive change in its composition and identity. Whether or not the staffs of the formerly separate parishes have previously achieved the sort of collaborative interaction that would encourage them to refer to themselves as "pastoral teams," the constant, unabating nature of the difficult work that makes collaboration possible will become particularly obvious under such circumstances.

The staffs at Holy Apostles (who would later join Assumption and St. Mary to form Corpus Christi) and at St. Christopher (who became part of Resurrection) were both members of cohort groups that were assigned a consultant, developed team and individual learning plans, and received a share of the Lilly grant to realize those plans. Holy Apostles actually completed its INSPIRE process, with Corpus Christi being admitted to another cohort after the completion of the merger. St. Christopher folded its INSPIRE efforts into the activities of the merged Resurrection parish. Consultants, pastors, and staff members were in agreement about the success and value of the initial contact with INSPIRE in both cases.⁵⁹ Holy Apostles was able to establish a team rapport and an expectation of collaboration within its growing staff of parish and community service administrators, while St. Christopher made strides toward the integration of its Anglo and Hispanic communities. Such results were quite typical of what INSPIRE was able to accomplish in many of the sixty or so parishes whose pastoral staffs participated in the project in some way.

The more distinctive feature in the case of the merged parishes, however, lies in the stories of what happened after the original INSPIRE parish became part of a larger parish community. It is not surprising that the results reflect the relative strengths and weaknesses of Corpus Christi and Resurrection Parishes, and of INSPIRE itself. INSPIRE has not offered a packaged "program," but has been very successful, instead, in assisting the development of specific, contextualized communities. When those communities are disrupted by some major transition, particularly when the staff membership changes substantially and suddenly, there is great danger of losing many of the gains that were tied to previous relationships and expectations. In both these merger situations, the strength of the staff culture in the one parish that had already participated in INSPIRE was a source of tension for some of their new colleagues.

At Corpus Christi, Father T's initially cool reaction to the INSPIRE process gave the consultant the impression that the new pastor was struggling to see its relevance in the face of what he considered to be significant administrative problems. Staff members, on the other hand, especially those who had worked with INSPIRE at Holy Apostles before the merger, confided in

⁵⁹ "Father D," 11/13/11; "Deacon C," 12/16/11; "Consultant 1," 3/22/12; "Consultant 2," 3/22/12; "Father M," 4/20/12.

the consultant about their discomfort with the new pastor. Father T, in turn, wondered whether the INSPIRE consultant were not “stirring up trouble” where none had been.⁶⁰ In the end, however, the consulting process ended up playing an important role in helping both pastor and staff move beyond the initial distrust. The successful conclusion of the earlier learning plans at Holy Apostles, the strong parish identity and culture that the three parishes at Corpus Christi had already established during the shared pastorate of Father M, and Father T’s own pastoral experience undoubtedly all contributed to this outcome. INSPIRE had helped to build the staff’s expectation of collaboration in the first place, and careful group process now fostered a significant decrease in tension as the staff’s initial perception of not being heard was gradually reversed. By the end of his short, three year tenure as pastor, Father T was able to speak enthusiastically and in detail about INSPIRE’s contribution to the staff culture at Corpus Christi and to his own ability to work within it.⁶¹

Unfortunately, INSPIRE was far less successful in addressing the transition issues at Resurrection. Some of the conflicts reported in early meetings suggest that the self-confidence of some of the St. Christopher team members (who had been learning group process through INSPIRE) may have led others on the planning committee to regard them as overbearing. Furthermore, the gains made at St. Christopher in integrating English and Spanish-speaking parishioners seem to have worried some representatives of the other churches, who became defensive about their own communities. Ultimately, the administrative nature of the merger shifted the process away from the kind of community-building concerns that had been the focus of Father G’s two-year pastorate at St. Christopher. Attention moved instead to obtaining basic agreement to the merger, working out initial practical arrangements, and receiving a pastor. Father D took on that role even before this minimal group process was really completed.⁶²

As a result of all this, the new parish staff found itself turned toward urgent practical needs with no cooperative structure for addressing them. Father D was caught up in responding to a continuous series of crises and in trying to “keep the peace” among factions in the new parish, leaving him with few resources of vision and energy for cooperating with the INSPIRE process. In any event, perhaps because that process was seen by some as “belonging” to St. Christopher, interest and participation were slow to come from other sectors. A habit developed, also seen in relation to the several other programs in which Resurrection participated, of drawing a temporary “energy boost” for the parish from some special event or gathering, only to let the momentum ebb quickly away.

INSPIRE, clearly, has relied heavily on the good will, talents, and enthusiasm of its participants. Its successes have been built on the general acceptance of its basic vision of a collaborative pastoral team and its grounding in attentive personal interaction and relationship. When that basic acceptance is in place, methods shared by the consultants have proven capable tools for getting through very difficult transitions. The will and determination to collaborate, however, is not itself a resource that can be given from outside the staff, even when it can be strongly encouraged. If the groundwork has not been laid, and is actually disrupted by structural and attitudinal barriers, a process like INSPIRE will have no place to take root in the local culture. It

⁶⁰ “Consultant 2,” 3/22/12.

⁶¹ “Father T,” 12/6/12.

⁶² “Deacon C,” 12/16/11.

is not too surprising to find it making a stronger contribution in the merger situation that was more clearly based on a community-building model than in the administrative model.

Pastoral and Theological Conclusions

In telling something of the stories of Corpus Christi and Resurrection parishes, I have certainly not tried to hide my preference for the community style of parish consolidation. This approach seems to me to be rooted in a desire for the attention to human context and interpersonal relationships that characterize Jesus's own presence to both his disciples and the crowds. No process can ever be entirely faithful to that heritage, of course, and motives will always be complex and mixed, but the primary driver of a merger like the one experienced at Corpus Christi appears again and again to be the strength and welfare of persons and communities.

What I have called the administrative style is not, however, simply the opposite of the community style. There are many instances to be cited in which a quick and efficient joining of two formerly distinct parish organizations under one administration is the only reasonable response to a true emergency. In many cases, probably most, such a process could also legitimately claim to be motivated primarily by "the strength and welfare of persons and communities." Whether or not the best choice of style was made, the Resurrection merger was no doubt sincerely undertaken in this way. The difficulty arises in that the administrative style, with its emphasis on organizational structures and leadership, makes its underlying pastoral motivations far less transparent, regardless of the rhetoric or formal procedures employed. The sense of distance that is created is felt most acutely by the parishioners themselves.

One important qualitative difference between the two cases here lies in the existence of a kind of viable community across parish boundaries before the merger at Corpus Christi, whereas no such community yet existed at Resurrection. This community was not simply a matter of shared space, or even of ethnic and economic similarity, but also of self-understanding and mutual cooperation. If the merger of parishes becomes, on the other hand, an engineered attempt to create a "community" where none has been fostered before, it is likely to succeed only by driving away those groups and individuals who cannot imagine themselves as members of the one consolidated community. Some amount of this alienation seems inevitable, as indeed it proved to be even at Corpus Christi. The questions are, how seriously is it taken within the process, what efforts are made to avoid it, and what sort of pastoral care is given to those who nonetheless fall victim to it? Certainly, as well, it raises an important question that must not be ignored about whom we might be *willing* to see leave our faith communities (and what we are ready to learn about ourselves from the answer)!

The Corpus Christi experience also suggests the usefulness of a genuine symbiosis between the leadership and the communities in merged parishes. While this may seem to be nothing more than a truism, it was not applied to the merger that took place at Resurrection. There, circumstances that were allowed to dictate the entire shape of the merger process were almost completely defined by the disposition of clerical personnel, not the communities and staff persons involved. If not for undue haste, it might have been possible at Resurrection, just as it was at Corpus Christi, to prepare the communities and potential leaders by establishing some common ground ahead of time. To put it very starkly, a combination of too little regard for the communities and staffs (as if their very existence were already something of an inconvenience),

and too great regard for the clerical leadership (as if any ordained person could lead any combination of communities by virtue of his ordination alone) cannot result in a happy situation for the leaders nor for the staffs nor for the communities. When, on the other hand, the whole leadership recognizes the particular character of constituent communities and their inter-relationships, and makes efforts to acknowledge, reverence, and grow that character, all sorts of creative solutions become possible. Attention can be given to the fears of loss that might be stirred up by consolidation plans (whether with “good reason” or not). Taking seriously such values as neighborhood intimacy and security, ethnic and family tradition, identity, and stability can strengthen an atmosphere of cooperation and desire for unity. None of the alternatives that overlook such values is ultimately basing itself on a workable ecclesiology of parish, whether a nostalgic parochialism that looks only to preserve older communities unchanged, or an inflexible clericalism that wants only an efficient distribution of priests, or an aloof bureaucracy that sees only its own task list.

The now common experience of parish consolidation could perhaps be received by the Church as an invitation to a culture of *dynamic community*, the local manifestation of the “pilgrim church,”⁶³ the church of “continual reformation,”⁶⁴ described by the Second Vatican Council. A parish community able not only to survive consolidation but to thrive in its wake would be characterized by attentiveness, openness, mutual appreciation, and ongoing development. The “treasures” it would store and share with newcomers and new generations would not be merely prescribed ways of seeing the world and fixed procedures for responding to it. Rather, the tradition of the dynamic local community would be a set of tools for an *ongoing* encounter in faith with the constantly changing world, and for community coherence in the midst of that continuous change. The ancient spiritual images of *charism* and *pilgrimage*, would seem better adapted to the needs of such a community than the equally traditional images of *steadfast virtue* and *unmovable rock*, and less likely to encourage lack of charity toward the wider world and even toward other Catholics (under the guise of “fidelity”). Not to grow in these directions is to risk continual conflict rather than continual growth. The necessary foundation of this growth, the case studies here would seem to suggest, is an understanding of parish as a complex of dynamic community, authentic leadership, and empowered mission.

⁶³ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), #48-51. Accessed 23, 2013 at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

⁶⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism), #6. Accessed August 23, 2013, at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html

ADDENDUM:
Further Questions for Pastoral Theology
Raised by the Practice of Parish Consolidation

Parish consolidation and the problems associated with it raise innumerable questions about the specific nature of any given parish community, as well as about the concept of parish itself. Failure to truly engage these questions can leave a parish unable to clearly and effectively articulate its mission and its strategy, and can render parish leaders unable to collaborate on a shared vision of Christian community in their specific location. This same failure contributes to the increasing sense of irrelevance that the entire notion of “parish community” is beginning to acquire, even among some quite active Catholics.

Among very many such pivotal questions are these:

- What is the central organizing point for a parish community? Is it a particular *ethnic community*, as was so often the case in American parishes of the last 150 years? Is it the usual legal expectation of a defined *geographical territory*? Is it the presence of a resident *ordained pastor*, as the current prevailing model in many US dioceses demands? Is it, rather, a particular *mission*, with communities established to meet particular concrete needs?
- What is lost and what is gained when parishes that once defined distinct communities with their own particular sense of mission and identity are brought together into a new and larger entity? How honestly and sensitively are the losses acknowledged? How quickly are the gains recognized and built upon?
- Does the merged parish aptly perform the true functions of a local church community?
- What new demands and conditions are placed on the work of parish team members by a new community reality? What models of work – from community volunteer to dedicated professional to contracted employee – are actually operating, and why?

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