

Chapter 4 Church

Rahner's ecclesiology, the study of the Church, flows organically from his Christology. The Church is the sacrament of the risen Lord, the community that keeps alive the memory of Jesus, the institution that carries on his mission of spreading the reign of God in the world. The Church fosters the Christian life by worshiping God through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and by practicing love of neighbor in the world, especially attending to those in need. Far from being a merely speculative study of the Church, Rahner's ecclesiology is filled with practical suggestions for spiritual growth and pastoral ministry. This becomes more apparent when we examine four specific challenges the Church faces in today's world: the divorce of spirituality from religion; the mass exodus of Catholics from the Church; the proper interpretation of Vatican II; and the renewal of parish life.

Spiritual but not Religious

Today, many good people, especially among the millennial generation, say they are spiritual but not religious. This is a contemporary version of a previous movement that said yes to Jesus but no to the church. In response, Rahner insists that Christianity is necessarily ecclesial because God's grace, which touches all dimensions of life, seeks visibility. The divine self-communication calls for a free personal response that has an external public dimension. This is true because human beings are enfleshed spirits, interdependent social beings who come to fulfillment in community life. Rahner thought that a rugged individualism was outmoded for people today serious about spiritual growth. A full Christian life involves participation in the Church because Christ's message is authoritative and confronts us as an objective reality and because we work out our salvation not in private isolation but in real life, which always has a communal and institutional dimension. Rahner recognized that some people are religiously tone deaf, with little appreciation of the rituals, creeds and doctrines that constitute organized religion. These individuals may still be holy people and should not be treated as spiritually inferior. At the same time, the pastoral task is to connect spirituality and religion, to demonstrate that religious doctrines and practices are designed to express and stir up the spiritual dimension of human existence. Doctrines are not merely statements of belief but have the important function of highlighting specific ways that God touches human existence and of encouraging a positive response to these divine gifts. Rituals, always in danger of formalism and magical interpretations, are meant to stretch the imagination, to lift the soul to God in worship, and to form community with fellow searchers. Making this case in the contemporary world is a difficult task but well worthwhile, so that more people can say I am spiritual and therefore I am religious.

The Exodus of Catholics

The numbers are indeed alarming. According to a 2008 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, one out of every three adult Americans who were raised Catholic have left the church. There are about 22 million former Catholics in the United States, slightly over ten percent of the adult population. If they were regarded as a distinct denomination, they would be the second largest Christian body in the country.

About half of former Catholics joined Protestant denominations, while the other half are no longer affiliated with any church. The unaffiliated are a diverse group, including explicit atheists, committed secular humanists, and those who have drifted away and feel no need for institutional religion. According to the Pew survey, many of the unaffiliated do have disagreements with church teaching on issues such as the role of women, homosexuality, abortion, divorce and remarriage, birth control, and clerical celibacy. Placed in a larger context, these former Catholics are part of the growing number of Americans of various backgrounds who claim no religious affiliation. Some sociologists argue that this recent development in the United States is the delayed result of the modern secularization process that has already eroded religious affiliation in Europe and will eventually cause the demise of religion among most enlightened people.

Scholars have pointed out that our current situation is still influenced by various modern developments: the Enlightenment conviction that reason is the key to human progress; the Romantic ideal of human flourishing in all dimensions of life; the success of political democracy with its separation of church and state; the growth of free market economies; and the reform movements that have sought to improve society by rational planning. These and other modern movements do create a context where ordinary people can choose to live without religious beliefs and rituals. Thus a growing number of people today seek the good life without any apparent need for religion. They may well be productive citizens, good family members, industrious workers and helpful friends without any explicit relationship to a religious tradition. Clearly, we face a great pastoral challenge as large numbers leave the Church, including people of good will who function well without the support of institutional religion.

Fifty years ago in his book *The Christian Commitment*, Rahner predicted this decline in the number of church members in developed countries and offered some perspectives on this inevitable trend. In an ideal world, we could imagine all people becoming members of the church in fulfillment of God's will. In reality, however, the modern church will remain a "diaspora community," a minority living in an increasingly pluralistic world. The secularization process that grants autonomy to politics, economics and other areas of common life is actually in accord with the impulse of the Gospel. Christianity does not demand that the church have control over the social order. Believers do not have a complete blueprint for how to organize society. Medieval Christendom that placed all areas of life under the authority of the church was the result of historical factors and not a necessary embodiment of Christian faith. Rahner claims that the diaspora situation of the church is a "must," which means that it is the inevitable consequence of fidelity to the thrust of the Gospel. Moreover, elements of Christian faith will remain operative in secular movements.

Given the ready availability of various worldviews, the church will inevitably lose members. Rahner advises us to avoid the “tyranny of numbers” and to accept the numerical losses with trust in God and a calm spirit. He quotes Augustine: “Many whom God has, the Church does not have.” Individuals who live out an exclusive humanism may well be on good terms with their Creator and Judge. Parents who have sons and daughters who no longer practice the faith may be understandably disappointed, but they can trust that the merciful God holds their children in gracious hands. Eyes sensitive to hidden grace may detect Gospel values still operative in the lives of former church members.

Paradoxically, Rahner contends that a calm acceptance of these unavoidable losses frees us for an aggressive, self-confident effort to persuade people to maintain or initiate church membership. A key element in this effort is to articulate and exemplify a Christian humanism that promotes personal growth and works for justice and peace in the world. We are stamped with the divine image, graced with the Holy Spirit, blessed with an inherent dignity and worth. God calls us to develop our talents and actualize our potential in order to serve the common good. Jesus Christ exemplifies human existence at its best, reminding us of what we are called to be. Furthermore, he shares with us the mission to make the world a better place. For Christians, love of God and love of neighbor are essentially and inextricably related. Prayer and worship reflect and fuel the struggle to create a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. Christian humanism embraces many values and goals of secular humanism, but enhances them by providing a context of ultimate meaning, the energy of spiritual motivation, and protection against restrictive ideologies. The claims of a faith-based humanism gain persuasive power when committed Christians live it out on a daily basis and draw on it to guide their participation in the political, economic and social realms of life.

Rahner insists that modern pluralism can actually strengthen the church despite the unavoidable loss of members. More people will be church-going believers because they have made a conscious choice and not just because they were born Catholic. Increasingly, individuals will maintain their Christian belief because they have experienced the power of Christ and his gospel in some concrete way and not merely out of habit or custom. A church with fewer but more committed members has a better chance of being a genuine sign of the risen Christ and an effective instrument of his mission in the world. Furthermore, a church that celebrates and exemplifies Christian humanism is more likely to attract new members who come to recognize that a transcendent humanism is more robust and attractive than a self-contained secular humanism.

A pastorally sensitive approach to the exodus from the Catholic Church would have to examine the distinctive motives of those who join mainline Protestant churches and those who affiliate with Evangelical congregations. It would also have to make a more nuanced analysis of the unaffiliated and propose a broader range of pastoral responses. In addressing all these concerns, however, it seems wise to keep Rahner’s advice in mind: trust God and avoid the tyranny of numbers, while working calmly but wholeheartedly to make the church a more credible and attractive sign of Christ’s humanizing message for the world.

Interpreting Vatican II

A third challenge facing the contemporary Church is how to interpret the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Fifty years after Pope John XXIII opened the Council on October 11, 1962, the Church is still in the process of appropriating and fulfilling the dominant vision which informs its major documents. These texts reflect traditional teaching as well as the modern renewal movements in scripture, liturgy, ecumenism and theology. As a result, the Church moved in directions now familiar to us: more active participation in the liturgy; greater appreciation of the scriptures; more emphasis on the role of the laity and the universal call to holiness; greater openness to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue; a deeper sense of responsibility for humanizing culture and transforming society; and a stronger commitment to the proposition that we are the Church. From the viewpoint of these striking developments, Vatican II appears as the culmination of the various reform movements which gathered momentum throughout the twentieth century and achieved official recognition in the conciliar documents. Within that framework, scholars continue to debate whether major conciliar teachings on important issues, like liturgy, religious liberty, ecumenism, world religions and the church in the world, are in continuity with the previous Catholic teachings or diverge from them in significant ways. At the popular level, this debate divides Catholics who favor the progressive spirit of reform initiated by the Council and those who are more attuned to traditional expressions of the faith. To keep this division in proper perspective, we should remember that younger Catholics have no direct memory of Vatican II and are not really concerned about how to interpret its teachings.

World Church

About five years before his death in 1984, Rahner gave a lecture in the United States on "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council" later published in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, which suggested a radically different way of interpreting the Council. Without totally rejecting the culmination explanation, Rahner invites us to view the Council as the rudimentary beginning of a new era in which the Church will explicitly understand itself for the first time as a world-Church and will function accordingly. A fully realized world-Church will not be dominated by European and American bishops and will not function like an "export firm" which disseminates a Roman version of Christianity around the world. It will understand itself as a communion of various local churches all rooted in their native cultures. In the world-Church, indigenous expressions of Christianity will interact with one another to enrich the universal Church.

Rahner, who was an official expert at Vatican II, admits that the Council recognized this new self-understanding only in an unformed and tentative fashion. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the bishops produced documents with implications greater than they could realize. In retrospect, we can detect intimations of an emerging world-Church in the work of the Council. In contrast to the First Vatican Council in 1870, native bishops from various countries in Asia and Africa were active participants in Vatican II. They gathered with their European and American colleagues not as an advisory board to the Pope, but as a collegial body, with and under the Bishop of Rome, exercising supreme teaching authority for the whole Church. Although these native bishops were limited in number and influence at the Council, they represented the future of a universal Church composed of local churches with indigenous hierarchies.

We can also find significant harbingers of the world-Church in the conciliar documents. The Constitution on the Liturgy made a crucial contribution to a more open Church by allowing the use of the vernacular in liturgical celebrations. By expanding the options beyond Latin, the bishops signaled their appreciation of diverse cultures and opened up the possibility of further cultural adaptations of the liturgy. The Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, explicitly addressed not only Christians but also the whole human family with all of its joys and sorrows. Although written from a largely European perspective, this groundbreaking document recognized the responsibility of the Church to attend to the needs of the larger family of nations, including the developing countries. In the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, the Church, for the first time in its history, officially offered a positive assessment of the world's great religious traditions, declaring her high regard for their doctrines and precepts, which are "rays of that truth which enlightens all people." In a number of places, the bishops expressed optimism about the effectiveness of God's salvific will for all people, restricted only by serious violations of conscience (*Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Gaudium et Spes* 23). Influenced by the pioneering work of the American theologian, John Courtney Murray, the Declaration on Religious Liberty recognized the importance of freedom of conscience and renounced the use of coercion or force in preaching the Gospel anywhere in the world. The Decree on Ecumenism encouraged ecumenical dialogue as a means of overcoming the divisions which thwart the worldwide mission of the Church. This brief survey suggests that at Vatican II, the Church did indeed take initial steps toward thinking and acting like a world-Church. Taken together, these conciliar teachings can provide a framework for continuing this process under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Second Great Transition

In developing his notion of the world-Church, Rahner suggests that we are now living through the second great transition in the history of the Church. The first took place in the first century under the leadership of the apostle Paul, as the primitive community moved from being a predominately Judeo - Christian Church to a Gentile Church. In this radical shift, Paul did not simply transplant or export the original Jewish understanding of Jesus into the Gentile world. Rather, he took the core of the Christian message, detached from Jewish forms (for example, circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary laws and synagogue services), and planted it in the pagan soil of the Roman empire where it grew over the next two millennia into the European form of Christianity that was still dominant at the Second Vatican Council.

The second great transition in the history of Christianity involves the current ongoing shift from a western Church to a world-Church. This radical departure, signaled by Vatican II, calls for the Church to proclaim the core Christian message, detached from its European and American cultural forms, to native cultures across the globe where it can develop in distinctive ways. A Church faithful to its worldwide mission must abandon the failed strategy of exporting Roman Christianity, with its culturally conditioned theology, rituals and Canon Law, to other parts of the world. With what Rahner calls "Pauline boldness," the Church needs a new form of evangelization which demands both a deeper understanding of the fundamental substance of the Christian message and greater freedom for local cultures to assimilate the core of the faith and creatively express it in appropriate ways. Then the universal Church, a communion of communions, will enjoy the fruits of a genuine dialogue between the various cultural expressions of the traditional story of Jesus crucified and risen.

A Diversified Church

A truly universal Church will be more diversified than the Roman Church we still know fifty years after the Council. Dreaming of the possibilities of the world-Church, Rahner envisions a future Pope sitting at a round table in open dialogue with leaders of the world's great religious traditions. In this future Church, national conferences of bishops will have greater power to make regional adaptations. Leaders of the Roman Curia will function more as servants than bureaucrats. Liturgical celebrations around the world will more clearly reflect the best of local cultures. Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue will flourish in a genuine search for a truth greater than any group now possesses. Rome will no longer attempt to impose a uniform Canon Law on all local churches. The Church will find ways to collaborate with other spiritual traditions in the vital task of creating a more just world.

Vatican Control

During the pontificates of John Paul II (1986-2006) and Benedict XVI (2006-2013), the Vatican has continued to impose its particular mentality on local churches: for example: overruling the American bishops on a variety of pastoral matters, including the proper time for first Penance, the use of inclusive language in the Catechism, and the translation of the new Missal mandated for all English speaking countries. From a Rahnerian perspective, such interventions appear as anachronistic efforts to maintain a system of control which cannot survive long term.

Support for the World Church

The movement of Vatican II toward the world-Church finds new energy in important contemporary trends. Demographically, the center of the Christian world has shifted southward away from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia and Latin America. Given the current trends, by 2025 the largest Christian populations will be in Africa and Latin America, with Asia fourth behind Europe. The growing number of native bishops from the southern hemisphere will surely exert great influence on the universal Church as they share their distinctive experiences of living the Christian faith in diverse situations.

The thrust toward a world-Church envisioned by Rahner also gains momentum from the secular process commonly called "globalization." This movement, fueled by the global economy and shaped by the Internet, has not only deepened our awareness of the essential unity of the human family, but has also, paradoxically, produced a new appreciation of the specific riches of particular cultures. A Church which believes in the Incarnation and reads the signs of the times must match its claims to universality with special attention to the particular needs of various groups around the world. Our global village, where time and space are so compressed, calls for a world-Church which proclaims the story of Jesus and allows it to develop in dialogue with various cultures.

Pastoral Implications

Pastorally, Rahner's world-Church dream functions as a sign of hope for Catholics who favor less Vatican centralization and more autonomy for local churches. For a long time that dream was a distant hope, accompanied by a

realistic resignation that it will not happen in the foreseeable future. The election of Pope Francis has already altered that outlook and created a remarkable new mood among many Catholics. His simple lifestyle and genuine care for the poor have touched the hearts of many in the Church and outside. His crucial decision to appoint eight Cardinals representing diverse geographical regions to help in the governance of the Church can be seen as a tiny first step in moving toward a world-Church. Rahner was convinced that this direction was inevitable and Catholics now have renewed hope that the initial thrust of Vatican II will enjoy a new springtime of growth.

Renewing Parishes

We can continue to explore the practical import of Rahner's ecclesiology by examining his insights on renewing parish life. With all the attention given to the papacy and large scale problems like clergy sex abuse, faithful Catholics can sometimes forget the crucial role their local parish plays in their actual experience of the Christian life. We can imagine Catholics who are so upset with the new translation of the Mass prayers that they forget how spiritually nourishing the Sunday liturgies are in their parish. It is possible to let frustration with the hierarchy overshadow the good work done by the parish in serving the poor in the neighborhood.

A Theology of the Parish

Rahner provides a theological perspective which directs our attention to the crucial role of the local parish in manifesting and fostering Christian discipleship. We commonly think of the Church as an enduring institution with set creeds, doctrines, rituals and laws. Rahner, who recognized the need for a more developed theology of the parish, invites us to think of the Church as an event. The Church is actualized and made real when it acts to worship God and spread the reign of God in the world. This happens most clearly when the community gathers for the Eucharistic celebration, which makes the death and resurrection of the Lord present here and now. This is the prime example of the general principle that the Church as event must take place at a given time and in a specific place. The Church also happens whenever parishioners gather together to participate in Christ's mission to the world: for example, by running a food distribution center for the poor. The parish is not simply a juridical subdivision of the larger church which exists for practical logistical reasons, but is, in its essence, an event of the universal church, "the highest degree of actuality of the total Church."

History

Historically, parishes in the United States have played a significant role in the life of Catholic citizens. Catholic immigrants to this country typically settled in urban areas with others of their own nationality. Once settled they

acquired land, built churches and hired priests to serve them. Catholic immigrants, around 3 million by 1880 and over 30 million by 1920, had to deal with the nativist prejudice and an often hostile dominant culture. For them, the parish served as a safe haven, a community that kept alive their ethnic customs, and a center for their spiritual and social lives. During the 19th century, lay people exercised great influence in parish life. They elected lay trustees who ran the parish and had charge of financial matters, including paying the salary of the priest. By 1900, the American bishops gained control over parishes, reserving to themselves ownership of parish property and the appointment of pastors. As a result the role of lay people in parish life gradually diminished, leaving them in the passive role commonly known as the “pay, pray and obey syndrome.”

World War II

World War II had a great effect on Catholic parishes in the United States. Protestants who served side by side with Catholics in the war found it difficult to maintain the nativist prejudices in all its previous vigor. After the war, Catholics went to college in great numbers through the benefits supplied by the G.I. Bill. This enabled them to get better jobs, make more money, and move into the suburbs where they helped establish new parishes. These parishes functioned more like a voluntary association and less like a haven from a hostile world. Catholic parishioners, now better educated and socially accepted, expected their priests to provide spiritual nourishment and moral guidance. The suburban parish was no longer the center of their social life, but it remained their religious home and they expected to have input on how it functioned. The election of John Kennedy in 1960, supported by around 80% of Catholics, signaled the new found confidence of many Catholics in their lives as citizens and parishioners.

Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council had an immense effect on parish life in the United States. At Sunday Masses, many parishioners went from silent spectators to full participants, including serving as lectors and Eucharistic ministers. Instead of relying on the priest to do all the parish ministry, lay persons took on a great variety of ministerial activities: running religious education programs, serving on parish councils, bringing their expertise to finance councils, preparing couples for marriage, teaching in RCIA programs, taking communion to the sick, preparing families for baptism, and leading parish efforts to assist the needy and promote justice and peace. Priests did less hands on ministry and spent more time and energy organizing and coordinating the many activities of their parishes.

Parish Life Today

The contrast between parish life before Vatican II and after is striking and instructive. As Rahner has noted, we rediscovered the theology of baptism which calls all the baptized to a life of holiness and service to the Church and the world. The growth of lay ecclesial ministry is not simply a pragmatic response to the priest shortage, but is rooted in a deeper appreciation of baptism as empowering full engagement in the life of the Church. This theology is actualized in local parishes which have implemented the teaching and spirit of Vatican II.

At their best, parishes provide parishioners with opportunities to use their gifts and talents to build up the Body of Christ and spread the kingdom in the world. They celebrate nourishing liturgies with solid homilies that relate the scriptures to their daily lives and singable music that is lively and uplifting. Effective parishes provide religious education programs for adults and children that enable all parishioners to gain a deeper understanding of their faith. They offer a great variety of opportunities for spiritual growth, such as retreats, Bible study, prayer groups and adoration. Healthy parishes reach out to serve the larger community through Christian service projects and programs to help the needy, as well as through all the efforts of parishioners to humanize the culture and to create a more just society and peaceful world. The church as event happens when parishioners gather to worship God and to serve others.

Parish Outreach

In his important book, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, written in 1970 for the German Synod of Bishops, Rahner offers some practical suggestions for improving the local church. A parish should be a community of Christians who have made a free decision to belong and are proactive in trying to Christianize the secular world. To stress the importance of aggressive outreach, Rahner maintained: "It means more to win one new Christian from what we may call neo-paganism than to keep ten old Christians." A parish can attract secularized persons by proclaiming a Christian humanism that celebrates self-actualization and a passion for justice, but in the religious context of an ultimate meaning and a transcendent goal. We can imagine a secular humanist, deeply concerned about poverty in his community, who is attracted to the local church by its compassionate and respectful outreach to the homeless.

Parish Pluralism

A parish should celebrate and model a healthy pluralism among parishioners who have diverse worldviews, theologies, and spiritualities. Although polarization is not the dominant problem in most parishes, parishioners should avoid harsh unsupported judgments about those who are different. Positively, parishes should foster dialogue and collaboration among diverse groups. Rahner suggests greater interaction among parish groups: for example, the Social Justice Committee could invite members of the Respect Life Movement to its meeting and offer them the opportunity to

speak. The point of this strategy is to create personal relationships with those who are different, making it harder to demonize them and easier to collaborate with them in promoting parish harmony and vitality.

A Declericalized Parish

Rahner calls for a church in which pastors realize that the Spirit is at work in all the parishioners and that the charismatic element cannot be completely regulated. Leadership itself has a charismatic dimension and pastors gain credibility by manifesting the Spirit in their ministry. Effective pastors appear as “genuinely human” and as authentic Christians freed by the Spirit for “unselfish service,” in exercising their leadership. Rahner has many practical suggestions for creating a declericalized parish. Ridding themselves of “the trappings of office,” pastors should act in an open and transparent way. On matters important to the whole parish, they should make known the dynamics of their decision making process. Respected pastors have the courage to admit mistakes and change poor decisions. In a declericalized parish, parishioners feel free to take initiative in proposing new directions and implementing new programs that further the mission of the parish. Effective pastors create a climate that empowers parishioners to take responsibility for making the parish a genuine sacrament of the reign of God. The pastoral task is to identify the specific gifts and talents of individual parishioners, facilitate their development, and coordinate them for the good of the parish. This strategy helps develop many diverse energy centers in the parish, multiplying its power to carry on the work of Christ.

The Parish and Social Justice

The local church is a servant community called to work for justice in the world. Sin has invaded social structures which perpetuate systemic evil. Social sin produces false consciousness that blinds whole groups to the injustices endured by oppressed people. In this situation, Rahner warns the clergy against acting like “ecclesiological introverts,” more concerned about internal church offices than the human needs of the larger community. He encourages pastors to deal directly with social issues, even when it is unpopular and even detrimental to some parishioners. Sometimes this means presenting “concrete directives about socio-political action” rather than sticking to “colorless principles which upset no one.” Realizing that challenging “unjust social situations in a concrete way” will lead to divisions in a parish, Rahner still believes this is better than avoiding conflict by sticking with vague principles. We find examples of Rahner’s radical approach in base communities around the world that courageously challenge specific instances of injustice, inspired by Jesus the liberator and Catholic social teaching.

A Parish with Open Doors

Given the pluralism of the modern world, Rahner argues that “we must be a Church with open doors.” Today it is harder to decide what constitutes the criteria for church membership. The “theologically relevant frontiers” of the Church are “obscure and certainly very fluid.” In practice, it is harder to distinguish what really divides those who claim membership in the Church and those who don’t. While recognizing that the hierarchy has the responsibility to defend orthodoxy and must “forcefully repel heresy,” Rahner points out how difficult it is today “to assign exactly the limits of orthodoxy.” There is a legitimate theological pluralism within the Church. Good Catholics have very different perceptions of the real meaning of key Christian doctrines, including the existence of God. Rahner contends that we should not treat individuals who once left the Church and want to return as if they are prodigal sons or lost sheep. On the contrary, Christian charity calls us to treat these “marginal settlers” as brothers and sisters who may have all along maintained a spiritual relationship to the Church, perhaps even deeper than those who never left. This line of argument also supports an open door policy for those wishing to join the Church. Pastors should not impose on them stricter criteria for membership than governs current members. If they have trouble accepting a particular doctrine, like the Immaculate Conception, it is sufficient for them to stay open to the possibility that it will have meaning for them as their spiritual journey continues. This pastoral strategy has enabled many good people with genuine Catholic sensibilities to join the Church despite some carefully considered reservations. Finally, the open door approach enables many Catholics to remain in the Church despite difficulties accepting every part of the Catholic symbol system. In one sense, all members of the church are “cafeteria Catholics” since no one personally appropriates everything in the long and rich Catholic tradition. Many Catholics, for instance, affirm the Nicene Creed without understanding Christ’s descent into hell or finding spiritual meaning in it. Rahner’s open door theology has special pastoral relevance in our postmodern world where it is hard to master such great pluralism and complexity in all areas of life, including questions of church membership.

An Open Parish

Rahner argues not only for an open door policy but also for “an open church” which stays engaged with the world. He feared a “ghetto mentality” in the post-Vatican II Church that tends to withdraw from “the public life of society,” reducing the Church to what sociologists consider a sect. Catholics who favor a sectarian Church see the world as an evil place to be kept at a distance, with “as many taboos as possible.” They tend to think of Catholics who favor a more open posture toward the world as enemies of orthodoxy. Actually, it is more obvious today that the Church cannot be reduced to a sect based on some strict standards of orthodoxy, because of the great pluralism already present in the Catholic community. The Catholic Church is by its very nature an open church called to evangelize individuals and to promote societal justice and peace.

The open Church is actualized in local parishes. Healthy parishes resist the sectarian temptation to turn inward and concentrate on engaging the world in diverse ways. For example, parishioners attuned to their baptismal call attempt to live the Gospel at the worksite and in the civic community. Preachers regularly highlight the social justice implications of the liturgical readings. The parish promotes Christian service projects that involve personal interaction with the needy and theological reflection on the whole activity. Parish volunteers collect food and serve it at a local food distribution center. The social justice committee keeps the whole parish aware of local and national issues, always looking for ways to organize a collaborative response to them. At Mass, the prayer of the faithful includes petitions for those in need locally and around the world. Some parishioners participate in direct action, including civil disobedience, to protest injustice. Pastors create an atmosphere that celebrates the open Church and encourages parishioners to use their unique gifts to counter the demonic tendencies in the world and to cooperate with God's grace in building the kingdom. This sketch of an ideal open parish suggests possibilities for real parishes looking for ways to help humanize the culture and transform society. The open engaged church model has received a great boost from Pope Francis through his example and his repeated reminders that the Church confined to the sanctuary suffocates, but regains energy in reaching out to those in need.

The Parish and Spirituality

The parish should be a community which nourishes the spiritual life of all its members. Rahner recognizes that parish life can be "spiritually lifeless" dominated by ritualism, legalism and a "resigned spiritual mediocrity." He thinks pastors confined to a church environment can get out of touch with the real life struggles of their parishioners. Clergy should at least try to imagine the challenges their parishioners face in living a normal secular life. Rahner wants pastors to reflect on how to present the Christian message in a credible way that has meaning for secularized people, "living as satisfied members of the consumer society." Parish leaders must avoid glib talk about weighty life concerns; for example, offering premature consolation to people still immersed in the early stages of grieving the loss of a loved one. Vibrant parishes promote conversation about spiritual concerns: sharing favorite images of God; witnessing to the significance of Jesus in daily life; celebrating the joy of the Holy Spirit present in stressful situations; keeping the commandments of God not as a burdensome duty but a glorious liberation from fear and egotism; reflecting on the classic spiritual writings; participating in the struggle for greater justice and peace; maintaining a contemplating spirit in the midst of busy demanding days; managing anxiety over death; and keeping hope alive on dark days. Honest conversations, formal and informal, on these kinds of questions enrich parish life. Pastors who participate in such discussions are prepared to present homilies that address real concerns and reflect the wisdom of ordinary people. Parish organizations and programs should include a spiritual dimension that provides perspective, motivation and direction. The experience of parishioners living out Christian ideals in the real world helps make the parish a richer spiritual resource.

Ecumenical Concerns

A parish should contribute at the local level to the ecumenical movement which strives to overcome divisions among Christians and to achieve the unity Christ desired for his followers. Near the end of his life, Rahner argued that theologians had cleared away the doctrinal obstacles to the reunion of Catholics and mainline Protestants so that the churches could actually unite in the near future. He made the point that there would be no more diversity in the reconciled church than already exists in the Catholic Church. Three decades later we still do not have the kind of unity Jesus prayed for in his farewell discourse at the Last Supper. This is the case despite continuing progress at the theological level, including the historic 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* issued by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church. This lack of progress at the institutional level has made it difficult to sustain the passion for Christian unity that was so alive in the early years after Vatican II.

Given the decline in ecumenical passion, parishes should put more emphasis on keeping alive the dream of a reconciled unity among Christian communities. Many parish activities could include an ecumenical dimension: for example, cooperating with another church in running a food distribution center for the poor. Developing an ecumenical spirit in the parish alerts parishioners to their responsibility to create friendly relations with their Christian neighbors and colleagues. Current practices suggest many opportunities for mutual interactions: periodic pulpit exchanges; common services on special days like Good Friday and Thanksgiving; regular meetings of congregational leaders; prayers for other churches at Sunday liturgies; and collaborative efforts on common local problems such as racism and poverty. The hope remains that parish based grassroots ecumenism, grounded in solid theological principles, will eventually move church leaders to take positive steps toward institutional unity.

Parish as Voluntary Association

Rahner foresaw that parishes in the future would take on more characteristics of voluntary associations. Many Catholics would no longer belong to parishes simply because of social expectations or the example of parents. People today, especially the millennial generation, make decisions about church affiliation based on which parish best meets their spiritual needs. Attending parishes outside geographical boundaries is now common and an accepted practice. This sets up a competitive situation, even if denied or undervalued by pastors, which highlights the need for competent, dedicated parish leaders. In this regard, Rahner offered a radical solution: parishes could surface the real leaders of the faith community; provide them with the necessary education and present them to the bishop for ordination. This would help overcome two serious problems: the shortage of priests and the inability of some priests to be effective leaders. Under the current system a man who has no real leadership skills or ability to preach effectively can apply to the seminary, receive training, and be ordained. He is then assigned to a parish, leaving the parish with a priest who is presumably of good will, but lacks the ability to provide effective leadership. Rahner's proposal offers a better chance that the pastor will be an effective leader. It also solves the priest shortage problem by assuring every viable Christian

community a process for discerning and securing a priest to serve them. Furthermore, Rahner maintained that the real leader could be married or unmarried and that in the modern Western world there is no reason why the leader could not be a woman. Long before Pope John Paul II officially closed debate on women's ordination, Rahner argued that there is no good historical or theological reason for forbidding the ordination of women, and, therefore, freedom should prevail, allowing for women's ordination to become a legitimate development within the Church. He rejected the argument that Jesus picked only males as members of the Twelve on the grounds that prevailing social custom made it impossible for women to serve as public witnesses to anything including the public ministry of Jesus.

Creative Leadership

With a growing number of Catholics attending parishes of choice, pastoral leaders have added incentive for providing good service. Parishes attract people in a variety of ways: being welcoming communities; providing prayerful liturgies with relevant homilies and singable music; offering a variety of solid religious education opportunities; organizing support groups for parishioners dealing with divorce, grief, and other challenges; attending to those who are sick and grieving; encouraging personal and group efforts on behalf of justice and peace; eliciting advice and suggestions on matters of common concern; and allowing parishioners opportunities to voice their grievances. Attractive parishes tap the talents and interests of parishioners by offering opportunities to participate in various structured groups such as parish councils, liturgy committees, finance councils, marriage preparation teams, and social justice committees. Pastoral leaders help attract people by being open, approachable, caring, competent and especially by loving the people they serve. Pastoral teams can appeal to more people if they represent age and gender diversity, while sharing a common vision of the parish mission. Given the current situation, it is especially important to find creative ways for women to participate more fully in parish leadership. Further possibilities can build on the great ministry already being done by women who today constitute a substantial majority of lay ecclesial ministers. Wise pastors serve more effectively by recognizing their own strengths and limitations. For example, a poor preacher could find ways to have more witness talks at Mass; a good teacher could do many of the classes in the RCIA program; an unorganized pastor could hire a competent pastoral administrator; a pastor who has trouble relating to the sick could delegate this to the parish deacon; and a priest with a broad vision could write the parish mission statement rather than the committee assigned this task. Such wise sharing of responsibilities helps make a parish more attractive to Catholics shopping for a spiritual home.

In the United States we are blessed with many fine parishes that are genuine sacraments of the risen Lord and effective signs of the kingdom. Creative pastoral leaders have found ways to adapt the vision of Vatican II to very diverse situations in our country. They have gained the trust of their parishioners and empowered them to use their specific gifts for the common good. They have energized the congregation around major projects; like establishing an adult education program or forming partnerships to improve the neighborhood. In the process, they have relied on the Spirit and demonstrated that pastoral ministry is more of a creative art than a technical strategy.

Summary

Rahner's ecclesiology, which sees the church as an event and the parish as an actualization of the universal church, provides a solid theological basis for a broad understanding of parish ministry. His theological vision prompts creative planning on the part of pastoral ministers who are accustomed to thinking of the church as a set institution. Some pastoral leaders may see Rahner's many pastoral suggestions for improving parish life as an affirmation of ministry already well done. Others may use them as a catalyst for new initiatives to revitalize the parish. His more radical suggestions, which seem so distant, can at least keep alive hopes for a better future.