

PARISH-LEVEL
EVANGELIZATION:
GRAPPLING WITH
CULTURE, CONFLICT,
AND IDENTITY

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*Basilica of the Sacred Heart
(University of Notre Dame);
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How do parishes go about attracting new members? What role do conflict and identity play in this process? As part of a multi-year study of Catholics and parish life, I interviewed parishioners, pastors, and staff at parishes in several different cities. I focus, here, on interviews with pastors and staff at two inner-city parishes in different big cities. In describing these two parishes, I aim to illustrate how strategies for attracting members differ and how these contrasting strategies are rooted in distinct parish identities and develop out of alternative approaches to conflict. Reflecting on the experiences of these two parishes can help us to recognize the entwined parts played by conflict and identity in shaping parish-level evangelization.

Many contemporary sociologists study the production of identity. The word “production” explicitly highlights the way in which sociologists see identity as something that is socially constructed. In my own research exploring Catholic parish life, I utilize the concept of identity work. Identity work emphasizes how identity is accomplished through interaction, agency, and effort. Importantly, this conceptualization highlights conflict and symbolic boundaries as key in identifying oneself and one’s community vis-à-vis others. Thus, identity creates both a bond and a boundary. It creates a bond between in-group members, but a boundary with out-group members.

In the summer of 2006, I conducted in-depth interviews with the pastors and staff members of St. Mark’s Parish and St. Luke’s Parish (both pseudonyms). Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were audio-taped and later transcribed. These conversations explored staff members’ visions of the parish, their own roles in the parish, and how conflicts were dealt with in the parish.

Both of these parishes are inner-city and historically Irish ethnic parishes, although St. Luke’s originally included a substantial number of German Catholics as well. Whereas St. Mark’s closed the doors to its school a few years back due to low enrollments, St. Luke’s still boasts of its elementary school. Unfortunately, it, too, is struggling with declining enrollments. Both parishes are in neighborhoods that have undergone racial and economic transitions, but St. Mark’s neighborhood is probably further along in this process than St. Luke’s. In addition, whereas St. Mark’s experienced an influx of African-Americans, St. Luke’s neighborhood is currently seeing an increase in Hispanic residents, leading to contrasting opportunities for parish growth.

Staff at both parishes tended to describe themselves as liberal Catholics, but as I will show, they enact parish identity in very different ways. The strategies used by parish leaders are not shaped merely by their own religious identity, but also in response to larger social and religious contexts and informed by parishioners’ pre-existing dispositions.

THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT: INTENTIONAL PARISHES AND CULTURAL SORTING

Multiple staff members at both parishes volunteered the term “intentional parish” in discussing where they see their parish going. Here is how one described it:

“There was an article in [the local Catholic paper] probably a year ago about how [another local parish] saw itself as what they termed an ‘intentional parish.’ And that was a really interesting concept to me. People belong to the parish not because they live there but because they want to belong to the parish. And I think that’s where churches are, well certainly non-Catholic churches are there. Mega-churches are there. And, I think Catholic churches are going there to some degree. And I don’t, I don’t think it’s a bad thing. I think that if we are going to maintain a sense of history, that kind of needs to happen.”

(Staff member at St. Luke’s)

While some, like the staff member above, describe this trend in relatively positive terms, other respondents discussed it in more negative terms:

“It’s scary because we have to think about what is going to make them mad and make them leave...It’s not my understanding of being Catholic, that’s easy for me to say...It just seems so consumer-oriented. My brother who left the Catholic Church and became a Methodist, when he and his wife were looking for a church, I found it very sad. The question you need to ask is what do you have to offer this congregation, not what does the congregation have to offer you. You should find a church where you can serve. And I think that is almost completely missing. ‘We’re going to go somewhere where I can hear something that is going to make me feel good, whether it’s conservative or liberal or traditional.’ I think it’s really twisted. With that said, if I were going to a church where the priest was boring or insulting, I don’t know what I would do...We are also really aware that [in our parish] many people are here because Father Mark is here, but what does that mean when he leaves?”

(Staff member at St. Mark’s)

Interestingly, the staff member above, who was more critical of parish-shopping, is located at St. Mark's, which benefitted from people intentionally choosing their parish rather than attending the parish closest to them, especially as a result of their charismatic pastor, Fr. Mark (pseudonym). Here is Fr. Mark discussing church-shopping, in which he clearly embraces the idea:

"I think some parishes are being hurt financially by it. Now, [we] happen to be one of the ones who are benefitting greatly, but there have been murmurings around the diocese from a couple of local parishes. 'You're stealing our parishioners.' Now, I'm not doing anything. All I'm doing is getting up in the pulpit and preaching the Word. And if they want to come and hear me rather than you or they want to get involved in a parish wherein social ministries is more important than the makeup of the chalice, then so be it. So be it. I think it is one of the few ways in the Catholic Church [that] Catholics can protest the movements that...It's their way of saying, 'We don't like what you're doing. We're going to go over here.' I think it's legitimate."
(Pastor of St. Mark's)

This flow of Catholics moving in protest, but also in search of a parish that feeds them, was recognized at St. Luke's as well. However, their pastor described the tendency this way:

"I think the Catholic Church in general is in this kind of underlying kind of battle if you will, right now. We'll just call it conservative vs. liberal for lack of anything better, okay. I think that that is here. I think to some degree it's in our minds, because I believe that people ultimately go where they are comfortable with the, umm, kind of overarching theology of the parish, which is kind of there. You know, it's kind of pastor-driven, it's kind of parishioner-driven, but it's kind of there. And I think that people will, they're more likely to go to where they're comfortable with the...parish theology, for lack of a better term."
(Pastor at St. Luke's)

While recognizing the conservative–liberal continuum and its relevance to the contemporary Catholic scene, in choosing to shift language and speak more broadly of parish theologies, Fr. Luke implicitly suggests the liberal–conservative continuum is inadequate to explain the full range of cultural sorting that is occurring based on parish-level differences in religious culture.

HEARING TWO PASTORS DESCRIBE THEIR PARISHES

“When I think of St. Mark’s, I think of a church that is situated geographically about where it should be situated spiritually, which is to say we’re on a hill, we’re overlooking a poorer side of [the city] which allows us to get engaged in social justice ministries which a Catholic church should be involved in...And just the fact that we’re on a hilltop, I like that fact because a hilltop is always a signal, a place where signals are sent and we are probably one of the last parishes, one of the few parishes in [the city] who aren’t kind of falling in line with this new wave of conservatism, which I think is an abhorrent trend in the Church.”
(Fr. Mark, Pastor at St. Mark’s)

“Every parish has a personality. I think one of the things that is still distinctive here is that it is still a neighborhood parish. A lot of the times in the summers you see kids playing in the playground. People are here all the time. There are still people who walk to church... [Parishioners] really feel that it is a welcoming community, that it’s a family...in some sense what we have now is that a lot of people that are younger who have moved away still come back here on Sundays. And so we’ve kind of talked about what do we need to do, also at the same time not losing the neighborhood focus, to become more of what you might call an intentional parish.”
(Fr. Luke, Pastor at St. Luke’s)

In what follows, I examine each of these parishes in turn, examining in particular how the pastor and staff members conceive of the parish and approach conflict.

ST. MARK'S— A “LAST STOP” PARISH

“It is a very welcoming parish...it’s a last stop parish for a lot of people. It’s like a lot of people come here and this helps them decide whether they are going to stay in the Catholic Church or not. They have a good experience here, I mean I’ve talked to tons of people who’ve said, ‘you know, I just was so disillusioned with the Church, I was tired of things going on and I came to [St. Mark’s] and found a home and feel comfortable again.” (Staff member at St. Mark’s)

Several of the staff members at St. Mark’s used the term “last stop” parish in identifying what made the parish distinctive. Alongside this imagery, they also articulated an understanding of their parish as being at odds with the hierarchical leadership of the diocese. Indeed, parish leaders at St. Mark’s leveraged this antagonism with the diocese (and especially the new bishop) to attract parishioners.

This conflict with the hierarchy was never more clearly articulated than when Fr. Mark stated,

“The biggest challenge for [the parish] is the animus between the congregation and the trends of the Church. There is so much anger in America at our hierarchical leadership, beginning with the pedophile scandal, the suppression of conversation around gender, etc. We did a survey, we ourselves did a survey to find out what were our strengths and our weaknesses and the most commonly recorded weakness or threat, threat, threat, the most commonly recorded threat, isn’t it ironic that it was the diocese?” (Pastor at St. Mark’s)

This perception of threat arose in the parish as a direct result of actions taken by a new more conservative bishop in the diocese. I asked about several groups and organizations that had previously met at the parish but had recently been forbidden church access by the diocese, and Fr. Mark responded,

“See, what the Church has done as part of the neo-conservative movement...Absolutely, there is no conversation about women’s ordination. Absolutely, there is no conversation about homosexuality. Absolutely there is no such thing as intellectual dissent. So, the Church has shut down conversation. Just shut it down. Well, you can’t do that. The human spirit won’t allow that. So, what the bishop has effectively done is given birth to an underground church. And so [this group which used to meet at the parish] is on the forefront of that underground Catholicism. And so they meet at [a local Unitarian church]. It’s, it’s the most pathetic, divisive, ignorant, uh, suppression and I don’t blame [the group]. I, I, I go to their things and a lot of priests do. It’s just...but that’s a diocesan thing, and it isn’t within our parish. It’s a damn shame it has to be that way. It’s a sinful shame.”

Despite embracing conflict with the Church hierarchy, Fr. Mark does not perceive much conflict within the parish, largely because he sees the parish as composed of like-minded, self-selected parishioners.

“No, and I’ll tell you why. Because this is a church of, of destination. People come from all around this area to get here. And so they come here, they’re coming here for a reason. So, by and large there’ll be, every now and then there will be, uh, small, small disagreements about this being in the homily or that being said, but by and large the people who come to [this parish] are of the same mind, by and large.”

Despite the parish's apparent success in its conflictual approach towards the diocesan hierarchy, several staff members mentioned concerns arising from the strategy.

"I don't know if this is true about every parish but I think there is a real danger at St. Mark's of thinking we are better than other parishes around. Almost to the point of not recognizing we are all part of the universal Catholic Church. And this was true even before Father Mark came, and this is part of my experience in doing RCIA is that adults come and participate in the RCIA process and they say things like, this is the only Catholic church that I would ever want to come to. And, with Father Mark being here, people

say, 'if Father Mark wasn't here I wouldn't be here.' It's like...that is a horrible thing for our RCIA director to hear because you are not joining Father's parish, you're joining something much bigger. Although unique character is a good thing, I think sometimes it can almost become an arrogant way of talking when people said things like, 'We are the only place that's truly preaching the gospel in [this city],' it's like, how insulting to these other parishes."

(Staff member at St. Mark's)

ST. LUKE'S—"A PARISH FOR EVERYONE"

Whereas St. Mark's leveraged conflict in order to strengthen identity, St. Luke's took a very different approach. Its strategy involved conflict avoidance and was linked to its identity as a "parish for everyone."

"You didn't ask this question, but I'll just say it anyway. I think one of the jobs of the pastor is obviously to be, to do everything he can to be everybody's pastor. And I think that pastors and staff members end up sometimes kind of having to sacrifice some of their own, at least publicly, sacrifice some of their own viewpoints because they're really trying to be staff or pastor for everybody." (Staff member at St. Luke's)

In order to avoid conflict, the parish actively engaged in cultural shaping to limit polarization. Even the music director recognized this as an important element of her job.

"Musically, we made a decision a long time ago to create a body of literature that the entire parish would know, no matter the Mass they went to...they would know one body of music so the parish wouldn't be polarized. Because music is something that can unite or divide and I've seen that happen so many places where we have all these different repertoires, even different song books for different groups in some parishes and then when you come together for a big celebration, the parish can't celebrate together. Like for confirmation or for a first Mass or an anniversary or installation of a pastor because they don't have a common repertoire. Music is the most important uniting factor, I believe, in parish worship."

A “CHURCH FOR EVERYONE” THAT EXCLUDES “EXTREMES”

Ironically, despite emphasizing its identity as a church for everyone, St. Luke’s used a strategy of excluding extremes in order to avoid polarizing conflict and division (and resultant parishioner discomfort). Here is how one staff member put it:

“We really try to stay middle of the road so that everyone can be comfortable here. For instance, we didn’t start a chapter and provide space for ‘Voice of the Faithful’ nor did we for, umm, there’s [a local] Right to Life group that wanted to be here...on the two ends of the spectrum...and we didn’t choose to house either of their main focus group things here because it marks you as a place that’s only for that kind of people.” (Staff member at St. Luke’s)

Interestingly, while scrupulously avoiding conflict along the liberal-conservative spectrum, staff members were more willing to step into the middle of conflict if they perceived it as non-ideological. For instance,

“If people have a beef about the pastor or whatever, and they don’t want to tell him about it, you know they want to tell me about it. I handle that by...I open their eyes to some of the stressors that the pastor has that the common person has no clue about. Like, for instance, there was one time we’re coming into church, it snowed Sunday morning, the walks were not shoveled, and I was walking in the door with one old lady and there were two priests. And one of the priests was fire department chaplain and the other one was really pretty unhealthy. And she said, ‘Well, you think one of those two guys would’ve gone out here and shoveled this walk for us so we wouldn’t fall.’ I said, ‘Well, I suppose they might’ve if, you know, one

guy wasn’t at a death in the middle of the night the firemen were dealing with. And you know, you want the pastor to have a heart attack out here? You want him in here saying Mass. Set your priorities.’ And she’s like, well, you know, you didn’t think about that... That’s most...mostly the kind of stuff that you have to deal with. Yes.”

In discussions of conflict between liberal and traditional Catholics, no staff member ever spoke of being this direct in resolving conflict. Indeed, it was a lack of directness and a basic avoidance of conflict that characterized St. Luke’s approach.

Surprisingly, while St. Luke’s continued to maintain its school and despite the fact that the parish on many objective measures of parish economic and institutional health was probably better off than St. Mark’s, staff members at St. Luke’s tended to provide a much less optimistic reading of the parish’s current situation than did the staff at St. Mark’s. Here is St. Luke’s pastor providing his narrative of the parish:

“I was very much a part of the fabric of the parish [in the 1950s and early 1960s]. It was a very, I think it was a slice of middle-America in those days. You know I always tell people that it was a bell-shaped curve, there were some who were fairly wealthy, with all that typically goes with affluence, and there were some people who were fairly poor. But basically from an income point of view it was pretty middle of the road. Although I would say it was working class.”

Continuing on to describe how it has changed, he emphasizes parish and broader Church decline.

“It’s a very different parish. You know of course the Church is a very different Church. I describe it to people as a shrinking violet, you know if you look at the neighborhood around here going to the east it’s still pretty much the same in many ways. But you go to the south, it’s clearly a changing neighborhood. The other thing that’s true I think is that, this kind of reflects the Church at large, obviously a lower percentage of people go to church.”

Discussions of decline, which unlike at St. Mark’s were attributed to broader neighborhood and societal decline rather than to the diocesan hierarchy, usually led into a discussion and identification of St. Luke’s key challenge in the context of evangelization and parish growth—adapting “a church for everyone” to changing demographics.

“There are Hispanics, lots of Hispanics living in the neighborhood, but they don’t come to church here, by and large. A few...some...but not the grand majority of Hispanics in our neighborhood come here to church.”

Staff members recognized that this was a potential source of growth for the parish but saw it as a challenge because many were still clinging to the parish’s past. Yet, they articulated this challenge in terms that linked it back to their guiding mission to be a church for everyone.

“This church started as an Irish and German church, way more Irish than German really, and it’s clinging to that right now...that’s really a challenge, to uh, open our hearts and our doors and our minds to believe that Christ is for everybody and our church is for everybody.”

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, because parish leaders help develop and enact parish strategies toward conflict, they influence how symbolic boundaries are drawn within parishes, and in turn help to shape parishioner identity. Strategies used by parish leaders are not shaped merely by their own identity. Parish leaders also respond to larger social and religious contexts—whether it be diocesan-level conflict, increased parish-shopping, demographic change, or simply the search for distinctive parish niches within local religious ecosystems. Parish leaders’ responses also tend to accommodate parishioners’ pre-existing dispositions. Staff members are privileged participants, here, but parishioners also participate in actively shaping and re-shaping parish identity. In efforts towards revitalizing parish life, strategies toward conflict play a crucial role.

Catholic theology and especially ecclesiology give the Church a vision and goal of a unity which exceeds that found in, or even hoped for, in other types of organizations. Yet, sociologically, conflict is consistently used culturally to construct symbolic boundaries and provide identity. This is especially clear at St. Mark’s, where symbolic boundaries identifying “us” vs. “them” (the diocesan hierarchy) serve to mobilize parish identity and energy. Even so, St. Mark’s wrestles with theological and ecclesiological questions that complicate typical strategies for group identification, and this is clear in the cautions and concerns voiced by staff at the parish. No doubt the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy is felt so poignantly by them in light of their persistent desire to remain a part of the wider Catholic church, even while animated by a general spirit of dissent. On the other hand, St. Luke’s offers an example of a parish that is trying to

cast wider boundaries for its parish identity. “Us” vs. “them” doesn’t come across nearly as much in their statements. Yet, here too, parish leaders feel the need to draw boundaries that exclude fellow Catholics. They exclude what they perceive as extreme groups since allowing these groups access “marks you as a place that’s only for that kind of people.” This choice reflects an implicit strategy of conflict avoidance. At the same time, this strategy of avoidance appears to have left St. Luke’s feeling culturally over-powered by polarizing tendencies in our society (and Church). It is simply attempting to keep out the extreme tendencies, rather than confronting and resolving problematic tendencies directly.

I hope that my research allows for a deeper reflection on what kind of identity we desire to produce as a faith community, what challenges are keeping us from enacting that identity, and what creative strategies (especially regarding conflict and conflict resolution) this vision might require. What could parish identity look like if, rather than leveraging conflict or avoiding it, a parish tried to actively engage in conflict resolution, in peacemaking? And how might this transform parish-level evangelization?



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