

# PARISH AND PLACE

*Making Room for Diversity in  
the American Catholic Church*

Tricia Colleen Bruce

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## Introduction

*Blouses and Shirts: Neckline within two inches of the top of the sternum; Loose-fitting not form-fitting; Sleeves should be at least to half (between shoulder and elbow); Opaque not see-through. Skirts and Pants: Skirt length should cover the knee when seated, no slit above the knee; Loose-fitting not form-fitting; Opaque not see-through. Men should wear neat and clean pants; no shorts. Veiling is welcomed and appreciated.*

—Posted Notice, Traditional Latin Mass Personal Parish

My attire is minimally compliant on this hot Texas day—my blouse a bit low, my skirt a bit high. I am grateful for the small woven basket in the foyer lending veils and bobby pins to cover my thick blond hair. Already a few minutes past nine o'clock, I sit down discreetly in an overflow-area pew and abide by the proximate posted notice: "SILENCE PLEASE."

The building is nothing aesthetically special. I'd almost missed it entirely, detoured by the Waffle House and seeing no exterior sign marking the former Methodist church as now Catholic. To be fair, the Honda bumper sticker reading "You can't be both Catholic and pro-abortion" offered a reasonable clue. Inside, drop ceilings, a center aisle flanked by pews, and a rendering of Michelangelo's Pietà atop a tripod easel substitute for ambience during renovations. Large Catholic families fill the pews; an oversized stroller blocks one aisle. A hefty man pinned "usher" unfolds extra chairs one-by-one, accommodating pregnant and young mothers first. A bound paper worship guide—one in English, one in Spanish— aids newcomers unfamiliar with the Traditional Latin Mass. An elderly woman drops a broken rosary into a basket for repair.

"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti." Cue the kneeling. I reach for a foam rectangle to ease my discomfort, though none around me seem fazed. "Dominus Vobiscum." Moms breastfeed. A dad rushes through glass exterior doors with his young son, who promptly throws up on the lawn. "Laus tibi, Christe." The sound system pops, clicks, and adds recurrent silence between discernable words of an English-spoken homily. Urgency translates, nonetheless: all are charged with baptizing a child in case of impending death, freeing him or her from original sin. Instructions are quite specific. "Oremus." The temperature rises. The usher drips. None protest.

Adorned in an elaborate tapestry, the Eucharist in its ornate golden monstrance receives heightened reverence. The young priest covers his hands so as to not touch it directly. Quiet prevails amidst the shuffle of a packed space; the faithful await communion. An a cappella choir breaks the silence to unify voices throughout. "Tantum ergo, Sacramentum Veneremur cernui." I sing along. All remain until the conclusion of the two-hour service. "Ite, Missa est." The 300 or so in attendance genuflect and amble out, quietly. An adjoined hall welcomes friendly post-Mass banter over coffee, in sharp contrast to the earlier reverence.

Parishioners feel at home, in their parish, in their place. They take pride in their church's formal status in the diocese. Theirs is a *personal parish* in the US Catholic Church, devoted exclusively to the Traditional Latin Mass. Community—and distinction—is palpable.

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#### EL FESTIVAL HISPANO

Mr Chiquitito	Music by DJ
Miss Chiquitita	"Hispanic Food"
4:00-5:00 p.m.	Tacos, Quesadillas, Empanadas,
Caritas Pintada	Tostadas, Chicharrones, Elotes,
Brincolin, Bailables, Cantantes	Frituras, Flautas, Tamales, Beer
	—Flyer, Hispanic Personal Parish

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I see the advertisement for the upcoming festival hanging from a road bridge on my drive to the church, in a town just north of a large Midwestern city. The mix of English words translates to the town's overwhelmingly non-Hispanic residents. The Virgin Mary (Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe) occupies the upper left hand corner of the vibrant green and red poster.

Arriving at the parish around 12:30 Saturday afternoon means overlapping with shoppers at a rummage sale on the back side of the church. I find a parking spot up front, close to the parish school. Our Lady of Guadalupe greets me on a large street-facing brick wall. She appears again, near the concrete stairway entrance, and again, inside the church—her image sewn into a hanging blue tapestry, and wrapped around a four-foot column in subdued golden hues. A blue shoebox sitting atop Our Lady's column-wrapped image invites donations.

The main worship space—white walls, pendant lights, modest stained glass windows—is full of sound and life, but not from Mass. The pastor (a middle-aged white non-Hispanic, Spanish-speaking priest) has agreed to meet with me for an interview. He is just finishing a baptism. The celebrating Latino family has everyone in tow—the newly baptized infant adorned in white, her siblings, parents, grandparents, godparents all well-dressed to mark the occasion. They congregate joyfully and talkatively around the altar. Older siblings take turns jumping off the priest's chair and dipping hands into the baptismal font. Neither activity seems to faze the pastor. He takes his time.

Once the space empties and quiets, I introduce myself. The priest switches to English. An echo in the main church, we instead step into the sacristy behind the alter. It's filled with vestments, candles, linens, and papers . . . but no chairs. We stand. He signs a consent form; I turn on the recorder. The parish is home for Hispanic Catholics, he tells me: they don't always feel welcome elsewhere. His parishioners want to pray in Spanish. Our Lady of Guadalupe means home. Theirs is a *personal parish* in the US Catholic Church, established by the archdiocese some eight years prior, canonically decreed in ministry to Hispanic Catholics. Will it be needed years from now, the pastor wonders aloud, his feet shuffling as he stands. Maybe, maybe not; but today, it is.

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This book is about *personal parishes* as an organizational response to grassroots transformations in American Catholicism. Unlike their territorial parish counterparts, personal parishes are decreed not primarily by geography, but by purpose. Whether in terms of ethnicity, liturgy, mission, or "some other reason," per Catholic Canon Law no. 518, personal parishes carve out sanctioned spaces for expressing Catholicism in ways that distinctively cater to Catholics' identities, preferences, and needs. Local bishops establish personal parishes with explicit purpose, apart from territory. Catholics throughout the United States have consequently found in

personal parishes places of welcome, immersion, and home among other Catholics like them: a parish, a purpose, and a place.

Just under half of US dioceses have established personal parishes in the last thirty years, for a total of 192 new personal parishes since 1983. Combined with older “national” parishes that remain open, there are some 1,317 personal parishes in America today. This constitutes a small but meaningful fraction—8 percent—among all Catholic parishes. Nearly every diocese (96 percent) has at least one personal parish. Even as the total number of parishes is decreasing, the proportion of dioceses with personal parishes grows each year.

Many of today’s personal parishes serve ethnic Catholics, now overwhelmingly non-European. But unlike national parishes formed to serve earlier Catholic immigrants (today subsumed under the “personal parish” label), new personal parishes also serve myriad other purposes: among them, devotion to the Traditional Latin Mass, to social justice, charismatic Catholicism, Anglican Use, tourism, and more. In catering to niche populations, personal parishes illuminate an institutional response to diversification. They depict a strategy deployed by leaders of the largest American religious group: an answer to demographic change and heterogeneous lay preference along fundamental lines of difference. *Parish and Place* tells this story.

#### **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM**

Catholicism in America has been shaped by two fundamental principles of organization: place and purpose. The former was codified in church law some 450 years ago. *Parish* came to mean a bounded territory, with a pastor appointed to serve all those living inside its geographic limits. An individual Catholic’s domicile determined his or her parish. Not unlike polling places or public school districts, all are assigned. All belong. “Parish” means place. Still today, every geographic inch of the United States is allocated to a territorial parish—each a part of a larger diocese. Parish boundaries assert the authoritative, administrative control of the institutional Church over local, organized religion lived out by individual Catholics.

But a purely territorial model of parish proved an awkward fit for American religion. Catholicism’s principle of parish-as-place clashed with a driving force of religion in America: congregationalism via voluntary association. Absent government-established religion—and amidst a plethora of options—Americans have long embraced the freedom to choose their

religious communities. Consequently, religious assemblies—Catholic parishes among them—came to exhibit participants’ preferences. Paired with the vast immigrant roots of US Catholicism, Catholic parishes acquire personas superseding (even undermining) territoriality. Lived, lay behavior spawned the need for an alternative organizational form.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, a second fundamental principle—purpose—simultaneously undergirds the organizational structure of Catholicism in the United States. Millions of earlier European immigrant Catholics—othered within a predominantly Protestant American milieu—built separatist Catholic worlds in schools, hospitals, charities . . . and national parishes. The urgency of Catholics’ divergent language and cultural needs meant that they weren’t always willing or able to congregate together. As Catholic historian Jay Dolan writes in *The American Catholic Experience*, “The national parish was a pragmatic response to this problem, and it became the principal institution the immigrants established in their attempt to preserve the religious life of the old country.” National parishes offered an organizational strategy whereby the US Catholic Church could reconcile the twin forces of purpose and place. It compromised Catholic leaders’ interest in retaining adherents, and lay Catholics’ desire to keep their cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Sociologically, observers of this latter trend—following the influential work of R. Stephen Warner—contend that American Catholicism is another iteration of “de facto congregationalism.” Voluntary association set a trajectory for local religion derivative of individual choice and relative autonomy from centralized denominational authorities. Catholics, following this line of theorizing, pick and choose parishes with little regard to church hierarchy or formal regulation. Local religious organizations, accordingly, emerge from grassroots agency. And, indeed—American Catholics carry a reputation for following their own conscience above hierarchical pronouncements. Churches exhibit these preferences—whether for language, liturgical orthodoxy, short sermons, guitar-based hymns, and so on and so forth. The parish has been well-theorized as a cultural product born of religious agency and the reappropriation of a shared tradition. But does this mean that parishes are fully congregational? Are they (or *all* local religious organizations in America) mostly the product of agency, cultural work, and lay appropriation of shared traditions? What might this look like from the top?<sup>3</sup>

#### **SEEING LOCAL RELIGION FROM THE TOP**

Viewed through Catholicism’s own organizational history, the structure of local religion also reflects institutional strategy. National parishes

flourished in nineteenth-century America. But in time, US bishops' pivoted away from national parishes, re-emphasizing territorial boundaries (a dynamic explored more fully in subsequent chapters). Later immigrants encountered a very different Catholic context of reception than that which had greeted earlier arrivals. The organizational strategy of the Church had changed: its leaders urged the laity to join territorial parishes, rather than to create new national ones. Parish petitions from newly-arrived Latino and Asian immigrants were typically denied. Further still, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) encouraged territorial parishes themselves to embed distinctive cultures. In short, an older model of parish organization appeared to meet extinction within an increasingly heterogeneous, pluralist, and integrationist American Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup>

But organizational strategies in the US Catholic Church have pivoted . . . again. The most recent Code of Canon Law (issued in 1983) granted bishops greater discretion and control over when and for whom to establish personal parishes. Its application also widened to include not only language and ethnicity but also “for some other reason,” a phrase with enough ambiguity to be leveraged in creative ways.

Today's American Catholic population exceeds 81.6 million. One in five American adults self-identify as Catholic. Racial and political diversification is reshaping Catholicism from above and below. Non-Hispanic whites now constitute just over half of the Church; growing numbers of Latino and Asian Catholics set Catholicism at the forefront of linguistic and cultural diversity in America. A plurality of political and ideological views further diversifies the US Catholic Church. Accompanying these changes on the ground are declines in priestly ordinations, the enduring ramifications of clergy abuse, rampant diocesan restructuring, resource contraction, and contested leadership.<sup>5</sup>

Nowhere are these challenges put more into focus than in the parish, which continues to operate as the locus of church-going Catholics' religious lives. Much of American Catholic practice takes place at or in association with the parish, given its monopoly on the celebration of most sacraments. While the overall Catholic population is growing, the total number of parishes nationwide is shrinking. Parish establishment dates average nearly a century old. Fewer parishes and fewer priests serve a historically large average number of parishioners, relying increasingly on pastor-sharing or lay (non-ordained) ministers. Multiracial congregations are more common in the Catholic Church than in any other Christian denomination.<sup>6</sup>

In the language of organizations, territorial parishes act as *generalist* organizations aiming to serve all in a heterogeneous market. They target

the middle, accessing the highest number of “customers” (parishioners). Parishes offer an average of four Sunday/Saturday vigil Masses a week, and many Catholics describe an “important difference” between services at the same parish. A third of parishes offer Mass in languages other than English at least once a month. Theologian Brett Hoover uses the term “shared parish” to describe the ways in which single church spaces serve multiple cultural groups—often Latinos and whites—who maintain distinctive languages, customs, and activities therein.<sup>7</sup>

Territorial parishes that don't celebrate Mass in languages other than English or Latin (two-thirds of all parishes) are overwhelmingly white. Other racial groups rarely attain a parish presence exceeding 5 percent. Latino Catholics—who comprise nearly a third of the total US Catholic population—are most likely to attend predominantly Latino parishes. Spanish-fluent Latino Catholics are even more likely to attend such parishes. While only a quarter of African American Catholics attend predominantly Black Catholic parishes (which are far fewer in number), among those who do, Mass frequency and parish satisfaction are higher. Asian Catholics are particularly likely to attend services at multiple locations, typically their territorial parish as well as another offering culturally specific activities.<sup>8</sup>

In a territorial parish marketplace, Catholics are choosing parishes. Within single parishes, Catholics are choosing Mass times. The panacea of integrated, diverse, generalist territorial churches—drawn together by residential proximity—is often contradicted by American Catholics' lived behavior. The more heterogeneous a population, the more difficult it is to appeal to all through a generalist organization. Even so, territorial parishes remain canonically bound to place despite lay behavior to the contrary. As the late Cardinal George put it, “objective relations do not depend on subjective ratification.”<sup>9</sup>

Today's personal parishes emerge as an organizational alternative: an institutional response to diversification and purpose-driven parish selection among American Catholics. They are not generalist but *specialist* organizations, catering to a narrower, intentionally homogeneous sector. While less common than territorial parishes, and not at the level of prominence that national parishes once had, new personal parishes appear each year, meeting an array of ethnic and non-ethnic purposes. Personal parishes respond to the needs of a particular market, audience, or niche. They encapsulate a world of their own, wholly focused on the people and purpose that canonically defines their existence.<sup>10</sup>

What explains the (re)emergence of the personal parish as a contemporary organizational form in American Catholicism? Such as in the diocese

of Omaha, where Catholics devoted to the Traditional Latin Mass gained a personal parish in 2007. Or San José's Vietnamese Catholics, who in 1999 secured approval for a personal parish, resolving decades of intense petitioning. Or, in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, where nine new personal parishes for various purposes were established in 2005 alone. Grassroots change begets new organizational forms.

Some kinds of institutional change can be linked to dramatic, historic events, such as that introduced by progressive bishops at Vatican II. But personal parishes' contemporary emergence is more prolonged. Theories of congregationalism help to explain lay behavior, but fall short in explaining that of institutional elites. Patterns of personal parish formation embody decisions made by the American Catholic hierarchy. New personal parishes reflect a judiciously applied, institutional, organizational strategy for accommodating difference. Their formal, canonical status distinguishes them from those whose elective purpose is born of attendees, neighborhoods, leaders, and histories rather than through authoritative decree. Personal parishes are not *de facto*; they are *de jure*.<sup>11</sup>

I wrote in my first book, *Faithful Revolution: How Voice of the Faithful Is Changing the Church*, about lay Catholics who built a grassroots movement to change the Church in the wake of abuse.<sup>12</sup> Theirs was what I called an intra-institutional social movement. Voice of the Faithful's form, identity, and tactics were heavily influenced by their desire to remain within the Church (banned by some bishops, even). Ultimately, this led them down a path that replicated some of the very institutional dynamics they set out to change. Knowing this, I found it curious when I began my study of personal parishes that the literature on local religious organizations skewed so much in the opposite direction, underplaying the impact of institutional authorities on lay organization. This kind of theorizing does little to explain formal parish establishment, which ultimately resides in the hands of local bishops. Personal parish designation matters especially because it does not reside in the hands of laypeople.

Accordingly, I turn here to the logic of organizations to rethink religious collectives from the top: as institutional strategy, rather than primarily the product of autonomous believers' behavior. Doing so expands current thinking about local religion and institutional change, interweaving insights from congregational studies, organizations, authority, geography, race, and power. Local religion is a structural, organizational reality as much as it is a socially constructed, cultural one. Organizational change is contingent upon institutions; outcomes are influenced by institutional authorities even as they are born of participants' own agency.

## THE CHAPTERS AHEAD

This book builds an understanding of institutionally managed organizational change from the top. It is one that privileges *interdependence*: parish decisions are connected through higher-order processes and wider conceptions of space (here, via dioceses). Local religion belongs to an interlocking structure. Seeing beyond congregationalism means accounting for what connects local religious organizations to each other. This broader view, moreover, better accounts for mobility across space and place, along with the territorial and social boundaries that guide such movement.

The forthcoming chapters trace the implications of this perspective through a variety of angles:

- Chapter 1 (Parish) unpacks the meaning of "parish" and the significance of formal parish status. It asserts the weight of institutional authority in defining local religious organizations. This chapter also profiles the characteristics of personal parishes in the United States today.
- Chapter 2 (Boundaries) shows how personal parishes resolve an institutional tension: Catholicism's tradition of territoriality and boundaries, on the one hand, and the realities of American Catholics' mobility, preference, and agency, on the other. It shows how institutions adapt organizational forms to accommodate new realities on the ground.
- Chapter 3 (Decisions) offers an insider look at how bishops make decisions to establish personal parishes . . . or not. While sources from the top and the grassroots play a role in the origins of new personal parishes, diocesan leaders nonetheless adjudicate personal parish outcomes.
- Chapter 4 (Difference) describes the institutional rationale for accommodating difference through non-assimilative, named, specialist organizations. Personal parishes show that multiracial congregations are not the only strategy used to accommodate racial diversity in local religion. Heterogeneous populations and uneven integration in territorial parishes introduces the need for organizational forms that cater to specific purposes.
- Chapter 5 (Fragmentation) discusses fragmentation as an inherent consequence of specialist adaptations to organizational structures. Personal parishes represent Catholicism's accommodation of religious agency from the top: a way for institutional leaders (as opposed to individual Catholics doing culture work on the ground) to make room for choice and difference, organizationally.
- Chapter 6 (Community) looks at the implications of personal parishes for building community across difference. It advances an approach to local religion that is necessarily interdependent, viewed across wider

conceptions of space, and framed by both territorial and social boundaries. For the Catholic Church, this means that leaders see community across the diocese rather than isolated within individual parishes.

- The Conclusion summarizes how personal parishes—defined not by territory but by purpose—enable the Catholic Church to respond institutionally to grassroots change and diversification in American Catholicism. A structural view of organizational change reveals multiple organizational forms to meet divergent needs, facilitate unity, and maintain institutional control. This carries lessons for understanding local religion, the future of personal parishes, and the place of purpose in a heterogeneous (Catholic) America.

All told, this is a story of organizational change amid internal diversification. American Catholics are changing, and American parishes are changing . . . always intertwined within broader structures of authority. Personal parishes enable the US Catholic Church to reconcile voluntary association with authoritative hierarchy . . . and Americans' penchant for preference with formally constituted, institutionally sanctioned church homes.

#### A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This book's focus is especially on personal parishes established after the promulgation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, and those with earlier founding dates that remain open today. The change, ascendancy, and innovative application of personal parishes in the past thirty years is a story that, until now, went untold.<sup>13</sup>

The research upon which this book is based includes an original, national study of personal parishes fielded to all US dioceses (the "National Survey of Personal Parishes," hereinafter NSPP). After first conducting a pilot study in a single diocese, I sent the NSPP in Fall 2012 to all 178 US (arch)dioceses inquiring about the presence, origins, and rationale for personal parishes. Eighty percent of (arch)dioceses responded. This produced a comprehensive national portrait and list of personal parishes in the United States. Where possible, I supplemented data from non-responding dioceses using diocesan websites and the 2012 Official Catholic Directory.

With this big-picture data in hand, I next selected twelve (arch)dioceses across eleven states for in-person field visits and interviews (see Appendix A for selection rationale and further methodological detail). I conducted visits between April and October 2013, attending Mass at every personal parish in the diocese and interviewing personal parish pastors. I

also interviewed diocesan representatives including bishops, multicultural staff, pastoral planners, and canon lawyers. A total of 68 in-person parish visits and 62 interviews (with 67 individuals) comprise the core ethnographic data informing this study.

This book does not approximate the experience of all Catholic parishes, nor that of all Catholics. The study intentionally examines a parish form that remains in the minority today, privileging an exception to the (territorial) rule. Personal parishes grant a window into how the Catholic Church changes amidst a changing Catholic population. The Church is a phenomenal absorbent of difference; that difference now expands farther than ever.