Report No. 4

RELIGIOUS VALUES AND PARISH PARTICIPATION: THE PARADOX OF INDIVIDUAL NEEDS IN A COMMUNITARIAN CHURCH

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OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

The Parish: Order and Religious Diversity

This is the second of two reports to address participation in religious rites and parish activities. The previous report examined social factors and presented findings about differences in participation associated with social location and stage in the life cycle. The present report examines religious factors. It looks at questions ranging from how Catholics define the purpose of their parish, to their perception of the most fundamental problems in human life for which religion offers answers, to the religious practices parishioners prefer. It explores how normative definitions of parish, foundational beliefs, and specialization in religious practices affect the range of parish activities in which Catholics participate, their reasons for attending Mass, their degree of satisfaction with the parish, and their sense of parish priorities.

A religious sect normally takes a narrow definition of the "one way' *the* essential belief or religious practice. An *ecclesia*, a church, normally seeks to sanctify a range of religious practices and experiences through a broad corpus of doctrine. Historically the Roman Catholic Church has thought of itself as a church rather than a sect. It should come as no surprise, then, that at the level of the local parish, different foundational beliefs, preferred religious practices, and expectations of the local church exist side-by-side. Using a broad definition of ecumenism, one could argue that the local parish is the most ecumenical organization existing. Not only are its people different sociologically but they bring very different religious needs and experiences to the same gathering. Studying the local parish, one is constantly reminded of the tension that exists within any church — between the need for order, for boundaries on acceptable beliefs and behaviors, and the recognition that Jesus and the Holy Spirit redeem and sanctify life in many forms. Badgered by demands from the church at Jerusalem that he conform to their definitions of proper doctrine and practice, the apostle Paul said: "I have become all things to all men for the sake of the Gospel" Nearly 2,000 years later our parish data remind us of that enduring tension.

Core Catholics: The Subjects Study

Previous reports in our series have taken pains to elaborate the kinds of samples used in the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life. Our research design has purposely focused on the parish as a living body, and on different kinds of individuals — pastors, staff, volunteer leaders, and ordinary parishioners — within the parish; by definition, these were people with parish connections. When we wanted to generalize to *all* adult Catholics in the United States, even those lacking parish connections, we have often had recourse to the General Social Surveys (GSS) collected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) of the University of Chicago. Especially we made extensive use of GSS data in Report 2, which profiled U.S. Catholics in the 1980s, and in Report 3, which offered generalizations about participation both by all Catholics and by core Catholics. Because succeeding reports will focus increasingly on the sample we have heretofore called "core Catholics" it is important to know more about these people and how they differ from adult Catholics as a whole.

Ours is a parish-connected sample. Not all adult Catholics have parish connections. Among those adults who would identify themselves as "Catholics" in a general population survey, we estimate that between l/4 and l/3 attend Mass very sporadically if at all, or, if they attend Mass more regularly, they float from parish to parish. They are not likely to be in our sample, either because they do not appear on parish records or because they have no interest in responding to a study of parish life. Whether those lacking parish connections should be considered Catholics in the full sense differs in the judgments of social scientists and church leaders.

In fact, the toughest research design questions in a project like ours concern: "Who is a Catholic?" and "What kinds of Catholics have we reached?" A research task force of the Pastoral Planning Conference is at work on the first question; they will do all

researchers dealing with the Catholic Church a tremendous service if they can devise an operational definition of a Catholic.

Certainly answers to this question abound. Some would argue for a canonical definition — any adult who is baptized and/or confirmed a Catholic. Others would insist on regular or periodic communion. Others would say anyone who was raised "culturally" in a Catholic family or setting, no matter how distant from the Sacraments and parish life that person now is. For a time, people used the term "nuclear Catholics" to describe those who were sacramentally-active and parish-connected. But then others said that it was a loaded term, because Church leaders would view nuclear Catholics as the true Catholics and would fail to listen to, minister to, or care about the marginal Catholic, who either for church policy or personal reasons had drifted away from sacramental life or parish connections. We are certainly aware that our term "core Catholic" could be misused, depending on one's policy agenda for the Church. We would welcome a term for our respondents that does not mislead or lend itself to misuse.

One of the best ways to protect against misuse is to compare our "core Catholic" parishioners with the broadest possible definition of a Catholic. The GSS asks for denominational affiliation; the person's self-classification — Catholic — is probably the most inclusive research-based definition of a Catholic. Our Parish Life Study, on the other hand, started with quite up-to-date parish census rolls in the 36 parishes. We sampled randomly from these lists and achieved a 59% response rate. In some respects we have a more exclusive definition of Catholic because a person had to have some connection to a parish to appear on the lists. But it is less exclusive than one would guess.

Parishes differ in their own definitions of "membership" For some the definition is canonical; for others, it is anyone regularly served, sacramentally or programmatically, by the parish. In our urban Black parishes, for example, the pastors indicated that between 15% and 40% of the adult members were not sacramentally confirmed Catholics. In other parishes a non-Catholic spouse who regularly participated with his/her family in parish rites was treated as a "member;" pastors felt that the option of keeping the family worshiping together in the same local faith community was preferable to the split in the family that would occur if the spouse went off to his/her own Baptist or Lutheran services. Not surprisingly, about 2% of our "core Catholics" are not Catholics canonically, but are served — sometimes sacramentally — *on a regular basis* by a parish. The proportion is not large, but it is fair to say that these are "registered parishioners" and their behavior approximates that of "core Catholics" Pastors know about these people and, like St. Paul, they work out their own timetable in ministering to them.

At the same time, over 6% of those carried on the census rolls of a parish who responded to our survey are rarely worshiping in the parish of their registration; they regularly worship at another parish. By a strict definition of "registered parishioner" these people could no longer be treated as members of the parish of their registration. Yet they certainly are part of the core Catholic population and we treated them as such.

So, a simple issue of what is a core Catholic becomes a complex issue because of differences in local practices and behavior. In the first instance, our Study was even more inclusive than GSS; in the second instance we were just as inclusive. But for those who are not registered at all in a parish, we are more exclusive; they have eluded either our sampling or our response net. We can only make informed guesses what proportion of these parish-unconnected Catholics are active or estranged by comparing some of the characteristics of our sample with the GSS data.

In general, our respondents are older, more likely to be female, and somewhat more "conservative" on church issues than are the GSS respondents. The average age of adult Catholics on GSS for the years 1982-84 is 42.6 years. The average age of our Study respondents for the same time period is 49.3 years. The GSS data show that 57% of adult Catholics are women, but 62% of our Study respondents are women. On GSS, 63% of the regular attenders are women, while on our own Study 61% of the regular Mass attenders are women.

Our parish-connected respondents are far more likely to be regular attenders than are Catholics in GSS's sample of the U.S. adult population; 85% of our respondents attend Mass 2-3 times a month or more, while only 55% of Catholics in the GSS sample attend that frequently. It is noteworthy that both sample groups have virtually identical proportions of spouses who are not Catholics, 20% and 19%. Our respondents have only slightly more children.

The major difference between the two survey designs is among young people: among our parish-connected respondents aged 18 to 29, only 5% rarely or never attend Mass, while in the GSS sample, 34% of the young Catholics rarely or never attend. In our Study 50% of adults in the 18-29 bracket attend Mass almost weekly, while only 29% of Catholics in the same age group of the GSS sample attend Mass almost weekly. In most age groupings, Mass attendance is about 20% higher in our sample than in the GSS sample, but the difference is most pronounced among the youngest Catholics.

These comparisons suggest a higher rate of inactivity among young Catholics in the general population than within the parishes. That should come as no surprise. Establishing parish ties takes much longer for young people nowadays. They leave the ancestral parish for college and early jobs; they marry later than before, have children later, and have fewer children. These social phenomena are widespread among young non-Hispanic Catholics. One should not conclude that the absence of parish ties and regular Mass attendance signal the loss of faith or religious feeling. Some scholars have found that religious sentiment still runs deep among the young. But one should not expect it to be manifested in the same parish-connected ways that it was one or two generations ago. While 12% of our parish-connected Study sample is under age 30, this is some distance from the 27% of the GSS non-Hispanic Catholic sample in the same age group. For our Study, we can generalize to young Catholics who *do* connect with the parish, but cannot say much without recourse to GSS about those who do *not* connect with the parish. Thus,

our study design, focusing as it does on registered parishioners or "core Catholics" is useful for its purpose but it cannot tell the whole story.

The parishioners in our sample are more "conservative" on church policy questions than are Catholics in general population surveys, but it would be inappropriate to call them "traditionalists" While it is true that 41% of our respondents feel the Pope should continue to offer teaching on birth control, 66% of them disagree with the Church's teaching on birth control; 80% of the respondents accept women as eucharistic ministers; 60% accept the idea that married men should be ordained to the priesthood; 85% do not fast weekly; and 93% make private confession no more than once a month. None of these attitudes or practices would describe a "traditionalist" sample.

We also need to remind readers that our generalizations about "core Catholics" refer to non-Hispanic Catholics. Hispanic Catholics are a large and rapidly growing segment of the American church. We could not do justice to the language and many cultural differences in Hispanic religiosity within our current Study. Thus, we have left them for a more detailed study later.

Parish-Like Communities

Finally, we need to alert those who may use findings from the Study to illuminate church planning, that a focus on "parish" may miss some important developments among Catholics nowadays. *Parish* is a canonically recognized local manifestation of the church based typically on geography, or religious or campus community. But there are many other parish-like communities within which Catholics may regularly manifest their religious life. Catholic college dormitories offer regular liturgies and join their participants in both a sacramental and social community. Sometimes retreat houses or abbeys function in that manner. At times a group committed to a social cause has a priest regularly in its midst and takes on parish-like functions for its regulars. Or the same may happen with "house churches" or *koinonia* groups. While these do not fit the church's design for order, their participants think of their community in parish-like ways. Again the tension between order and diversity is apparent, for Jesus has said: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,' at the same time the church expresses concern over potentially heterodox practices which could be supervised better within canonical parishes.

Our research design cannot do an effective job of estimating how many adult American Catholics participate in non-canonical communities or live their religious life outside the canonical parish. We have reason to believe that the phenomenon deserves attention because (1) one in eight, 12.5%, of our 1,100-parish sample has organized itself into smaller communities, which typically have an administrative or communications function; some parishes are showing how these smaller units can perform sacramentally-based community-building functions as well; and (2) some of the 6% of the parishioners who regularly worship outside their parish of registration are active in alternative parish-

like communities. These latter parishioners, combined with some of those who have no parish registration, may be an important part of the American church missed in our Study.

These considerations do not detract from the utility of our Study of parish and "core Catholic" parishioners in the more conventional sense. After all, there are over 18,500 recognized Catholic parishes in the country. Yet, let no one presume that this Study has exhausted the parish-like phenomena that the winds of the Spirit are forming around the country.

Expectations of the Parish: "What is a parish supposed to be?"

One Catholic may expect different rites and activities of her parish because she has a different normative standard for the parish than that held by another Catholic. For, one may define the parish as a center that provides the Sacraments; another defines it as a community of God's people who reaffirm and help each other spiritually and materially; another defines it as the local agency for the sustenance and propagation of the Roman Catholic faith; still another may see its primary function as a provider of schools for children; still another may see it as the organization that will get me to heaven; and finally another will see it as the base for a movement to change an unjust social and economic order. There are many definitions of parish; some are probably rooted in the symbols the church uses to describe itself and others derive from personal religious feelings and needs. Yet all may function to guide a person into various religious rites and parish activities, to measure satisfaction with the parish's performance, or to set priorities for the parish to achieve its ends.

Models of the Parish

Ideas about what the church is supposed to be often define "models of the parish" Avery Dulles has offered insights that have provoked many church scholars to think of parish in five ways, his "Models of the Church" are deeply rooted in Christian theology and perhaps in the experience of parishioners. The *institutional* model concentrates on the ecclesiastical authority of the Church in Pope and bishops, the truth of its teachings, and the necessity of finding salvation in its midst. The *mystical communion* model stresses that the church is the body of Christ, the people of God, that within its fellowship people find both closeness to God and harmony with each other, and that they realize fellowship through shared responsibility. The *sacramental* model combines both notions of authority and fellowship within the Sacraments; in a tangible way Christ offers salvation in the Sacraments and it is the church's purpose to witness to that salvation. The *herald* model concentrates especially on the formation of its people through teaching and proclamation of God's word; the church's authority derives less from its Sacraments than from the clarity and evangelical fervor with which it proclaims the Gospel message as well as all of God's teachings. The *servant* model derives from both Isaiah and the cross; it depicts the church as the servant suffering all the indignities of a sin-scarred society as a way of healing that society; it proclaims its message through its deeds of prophetic suffering and

social action. None of Dulles' models of Church is mutually exclusive but represents different emphases, different thrusts within Christian tradition.

Nowhere is the lack of exclusiveness in models of Church more evident than in the definitions our core Catholic parishioners give to parish. The same person may offer several standards of what a parish is supposed to be.

Parishioners in the 36 parishes were asked: "In your own words, what do you think the main purpose of a parish is supposed to be?" Even though the question pushes respondents in the direction of a *main* purpose, the majority of respondents offered multiple purposes: 13% gave no response, 33% offered one purpose, 34% mentioned two purposes, 15% listed three purposes, and 5% described four or more purposes. We have analyzed their written responses and grouped them first into sixty specific purposes and then seven general themes. Those themes are shown in Table 1. The first column shows the proportion of parishioners who mentioned this as a purpose of the parish; since the same person could mention more than one purpose, the total percentage, of course, amounts to well over l00%. The second column shows the proportion mentioning *only* this theme and no other theme; since most parishioners offered more than one definition of parish, entries in this column are substantially smaller than entries the first column.

Table 1
Purpose of Parish, Parishioners' Definitions

Description of General Theme	Proportion Mentioning	Exclusive Mention
1. Reference to parish as people of God, body of Christ, family, community, fellowship of believers	42%	8.6%
2. Emphasis on charitable works, help for those in need	33%	3.1%
3. General: a place for religious activity, spiritual enrichment	32%	9.3%
4. A place offering worship and Sacraments, liturgies	28%	4.1%
5. Emphasis on *personal* religious growth, faith, holiness, closeness to God, getting to heaven	26%	4. 1%
6. Emphasis on religious formation, socializing children, evangelizing adults	25%	3.1%
7. Emphasis on preservation and propagation of the Roman Catholic faith	6%	1.2%

The most obvious feature of this table is that Catholics define their parishes quite broadly. Not only does the same person offer several themes (or models of Church), but the highest incidence of offering only one theme is also in the thematic categories that are most general (3 and 1). When very specific themes are used (e.g., 2, 6, 7), parishioners are more likely to mention another purpose. First of all, then, we can conclude that Catholics are quite pluralistic in their expectations of their parish; they recognize that it will serve many purposes.

We also notice how widely theme I — in Dulles' terms, the *mystical communion-* — is used to define the purpose of the parish. The post-Vatican II terminology, "people of God," and the traditional symbolism, "body of Christ," are very important orienting symbols for American Catholics. These symbols are communitarian; they image a community, a fellowship with a common point of orientation. The symbols themselves do not assure that a *person's* most deeply held beliefs will be communitarian, as we will see later in this report, but they set standards for what is to be expected of a *parish*.

The second most common definition of parish also focuses on communitarian objectives — service to others in need. Parish is not only a sacral community, but also a social community. We do not think this definition coincides nicely with Dulles *servant* model, however. To some extent, people who expect the parish to serve those in need anticipate that it will suffer alongside and for a broken society. But charitable works can also be done comfortably, particularly in a middle-class, American mainstream religious body. That may again be a reason why so few Catholics are communitarian in their deepest *personal* beliefs but are communitarian in their expectations of *parish*, as we shall see later.

The *sacramental* model and the *herald* model may be seen in themes 4 and 6, respectively. Certainly a sizable segment of Catholic parishioners use those themes to define parish. Perhaps the *institutional* model is included in theme 7, but we do not know whether it is exhausted by the small number of responses using this theme, 6%; it is probable, for example, that some of those emphasizing religious formation mean *Catholic* religious formation. Theme 3 is so amorphous that it does not fit clearly into any of the models and theme 5 is so personalistic that it is something of a curiosity in a church that stresses community symbols. It is no curiosity in American culture, however; the values of ascetic Protestantism, so pervasive in this country, have traditionally been self-centered. And the Roman Catholic church itself has contributed to a self-centered religiosity, especially during the immigrant period, with its catechetical emphasis on individual devotions, good works, and growth in personal holiness.

The models of Church, then, are provocative but they do not uniformly capture the ways ordinary parishioners envision *parish*, i.e., the local church. But do the ways people define parish predict anything about the parish activities in which they engage, their preferred religious practices, and the priorities they set for their parish?

Parish Purposes and Parish Activities

If parishioners offered exclusive definitions of the purpose of parish we might expect them to specialize in only those activities that fit their definition of parish purpose. When, on the other hand, the same parishioner offers several purposes for the parish, we might expect people to volunteer their services or participate in a wide variety of parish activities.

We asked parishioners to list the parish activities within which they participate. While just over half of the parishioners are participating in no activities beyond Mass or other religious rites, 21% mention one additional activity, 15% offer two, 8% describe three, and 6% list four or more. We have grouped these activities in Table 2. The first column lists what proportion of parishioners do at least one activity of this type; it does not total 100% because the same parishioner may engage in more than one type of activity. The second column shows the proportion of times this type of activity is mentioned as a percentage of all activities mentioned.

Table 2
Participation in Types of Parish Activities, Parishioners Sample

Type of Activity	Proportion of Parishioners Involved	Proportion of Times This Activity Mentioned
1. Social life, recreational	22%	27%
2. Lay liturgical roles, e.g., liturgy committee, choir, rector, communion minister	19%	26%
3. Education, evangelism	14%	19%
4. Governance, finance, administration, housekeeping	12%	15%
5. Devotional or personal renewal	6%	8%
6. Social action, welfare, justice	4%	5%
Participation in no activity	52%	—

The data indicate that Catholics who do participate in parish activities — and 52% do not — are more likely to prefer those activities of a social or recreational nature, those related to formal responsibilities for liturgies, education and (to a lesser extent) evangelism, and parish governance or administration. Despite the fact that communitarian definitions of *parish* are predominant, these are not manifested to a great degree in

participation in parish-based social action, welfare, and justice activities. The parish sense of community works itself out more in liturgical responsibilities, social life and recreational settings. The emphasis on education is manifested particularly in the teaching of CCD, but some also participate in adult education groups.

Two great constitutional documents of Vatican II are often cited as defining the meaning of Church and the role of lay persons in the Church and society — *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. A third document — *Apostolicum Actuositatem* — also dealt with specific responsibilities of the laity, but sections of its earlier draft were placed in other constitutional documents, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, and it has never been considered as significant as the other documents. A language describing "a people of God" joined in sacramental life and commissioned "to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God" is unmistakably clear in these documents. Following Vatican II, many papal encyclicals and bishops' pastoral letters have analyzed current world and national conditions and have interpreted ways that Christians can be of service to humankind.

There is no question from our data that: (l) American parishioners use the metaphor "people of God" or something similar to define their parish, (2) they see their parish as a place that offers the Sacraments and they participate in its sacramental life (although not showing deep understanding of the place of Sacraments in salvation), and (3) many of them now participate in activities that sustain a liturgical and social community. Although many of them also think of the parish as a base for acts of mercy and charitable works, surprisingly few parishioners actually participate in the *parish's* programs aimed at social welfare, social action, or social justice. Partly that is because parishes provide a limited range of opportunities for social welfare/social action; only 52% of American parishes have social service programs that serve needy individuals, and only 20% have social action programs. Furthermore, as we shall see later in this report, parish efforts to serve the poor outside the parish, or parish efforts to overcome social injustice, rate as substantially lower priorities than "internal" parish matters. Catholics may be engaging in these activities through organizations outside their parish; we will explore that in a later report. Clearly there is still a wide gap between thought and action: parishioners' definitions of parish are quite consistent with the constitutional documents of Vatican II; however, when it comes to directing Christians' attention outside the self-centered confines of parish and into the world, both the programs parishes offer and the activities to which parishioners devote energy fall far short of the model.

Despite the tendency of parishioners to offer several definitions of what a parish is supposed to be and to participate in several different activities besides religious rites, there is still some specialization of activity. We cross-tabulated definitions of parish with types of parish activities. For the most part, parishioners who offered one of the definitions of parish engaged in activities not much different than activities of those who offered a different definition of parish. But two groups — the body of Christ/people of God types and the preservation/propagation of the Catholic faith types — differ quite markedly from each other. In Dulles' terminology, let us think of these as the *mystical communion* types

and the *institutional types*. Given the content of the definitions, it would probably not be inaccurate to think of the former as *post-conciliar* and the latter as *pre-conciliar*.

The mystical communion/post-conciliar types are those *most* likely to participate in parish activities beyond Mass. They are much more likely than others to participate through lay roles related to the Eucharistic celebration, in education and evangelism, and in personal devotion and renewal; they are slightly more likely than others to participate in parish governance, social welfare and justice, and social life and recreational activities. The institutional/pre-conciliar types are those *least* likely to participate at all beyond Mass, least likely to participate in lay roles connected with the liturgies, education and evangelism, and personal religious renewal; they are also lower than others on participation in social welfare and social justice activities. When the institutional/preconciliar types do participate disproportionately to their numbers, it is in parish governance and administration.

Not surprisingly the people who espouse these two definitions of parish differ socially from each other. The mystical communion/post-conciliar types are considerably more likely to be women, and the institutional/ pre-conciliar types are somewhat more likely to be men. But age is an even larger differentiator. Those who define parish through body of Christ/people of God symbols are far more likely to be in the 18-29 and 30-49 age groups, while those who stress the preservation and propagation of the Catholic faith are slightly more likely to be in the older age groups. The younger adults are also especially committed to "herald" symbols of parish and are much less likely to cite "general spiritual enrichment" as the main purpose of the parish.

The post-Vatican II church has placed special emphasis on metaphors such as the body of Christ and the people of God. It should come as no surprise that younger Catholics who have been more completely socialized in the post-conciliar church have appropriated these symbols and that older people have not. At the same time, the tendency for both the mystical communion types and the institutional types to be highly represented in parish governance and administrative roles suggests that there is perhaps a potential for parish conflict based on different perspectives of what a parish is supposed to be; the potential for conflict is probably muted by the fact that so few parishioners are exclusively institutional in their definitions of parish.

We have also looked at several other aspects of parishioners' lives within their parishes that might be affected by their definitions of what a parish is supposed to be. We examined, for instance, the extent to which the parish satisfies both their spiritual needs and their social needs, and found minimal differences; the mystical communion types are a little more likely than others to feel that the parish meets their social needs but, of course, they are the most participatory group. When we reviewed reasons for attending Mass we did not find notable differences; the institutional types are slightly more likely to attend to set a good example for children, while those who view the parish as primarily a place for personal spiritual growth are more likely to view Mass as an opportunity to communicate with God.

Parish Purposes and Religious Practices

Pronounced differences do appear when we examine preferred religious practices and parish priorities. We used a complex measure to uncover what kinds of religious practices individuals perform. We asked how frequently each respondent performed ten public religious rites ranging from Mass and communion, to confession, public rosary, novenas, etc. We also asked how frequently they practiced fourteen private acts ranging from private prayer and Bible study, to sharing religious beliefs with others, watching religious TV, fasting, etc. Through the use of a procedure called factor analysis, we found that certain of these activities cluster together: parishioners who frequently do activities in one cluster are less likely to do activities in another cluster. Four factors emerge:

• *Factor 1* we have labeled "pre-Vatican II prayer and devotions:" such activities as benediction, stations of the cross, novenas, fasting, etc.;

• *Factor 2* we have labeled "expressive religiosity:" such activities as sharing religious beliefs with others, whether like-minded or different, Catholic or non-Catholic;

• *Factor 3* we have labeled "post-Vatican II private devotionalism:" such activities as private or small group prayer and Bible study;

• *Factor 4* we have labeled "basic public practices:" limited to Mass and communion.

Once again, there are only modest differences in the religious practices of Catholics depending on their definitions of the purpose of parish. The largest and most consistent differences, however, appear between the mystical communion/post-conciliar types and the institutional types. The former are much less likely to engage in the religious activities associated with Factor 1 — pre-Vatican II prayer and devotion; the latter are more likely to do so. The mystical communion types are more likely to do those religious activities involved in Factor 2 — expressive religiosity — and Factor 3 — post-Vatican II private devotionalism; the institutional types are much less likely to do either. The differences among all groups are very small on Factor 4 — "basic public practices" Generally, then, these findings regarding religious practices reinforce the differences noted in types of parish activities.

Parish Purposes and Parish Priorities

Core Catholics set different priorities for their parishes. Our respondents were presented with the following question: "Given limited resources within your parish, toward which of the following activities should the parish direct much of its attention?" The list of activities is presented in Table 3 along with the average priority ranking across parishioners. The higher the score on a range from 1 to 5, the higher the priority attached to the activity; there was a strong tendency for respondents to use scores no lower than 3 and, thus, the effective range is probably 3 to 5.

Table 3
Parishioners' Priorities among Parish Activities

Activity	Priority Ranking
(a) Enhancing religious education of:	
(i) Pre-teens	3.88
(ii) Teenagers	4.04
(iii) Adults	3.64
(b) Making converts and/or reclaiming church dropouts	3.70
(c) Helping poor people within the parish	3.82
(d) Helping poor people outside the parish	3.26
(e) Improving liturgy	3.40
(f) Improving the social life of the parish	3.33
(g) Improving contacts with non-Catholic churches within our neighborhood	3.33
(h) Working to change unjust socioeconomic conditions	3.25

From this list, education and helping the poor within the parish rank highest among the activities to which the parish should devote attention. In the minds of core Catholics, clearly, attention to the religious education of teenagers ranks as the most compelling need. Evangelism and adult education are in the middle ranks. Improving the parish liturgical and social life are lower. Helping the poor *outside* the parish and working toward social justice are given the lowest priorities.

When we examine the parish priorities advocated by parishioners who have differing definitions of parish, we find patterns similar to what we have observed before. Regardless of what definition of parish a person espouses, the differences in parish priorities are minimal for education of pre-teens, teens, and adults, or improvements in the liturgy. The differences that occur focus on social welfare/social justice, ecumenism, and evangelism. Again, the most notable differences are between the mystical communion and the institutional types; incidentally, the people who define the parish as an agency for serving those in need have parish priority patterns very similar to the mystical communion types. Both those who use the "body of Christ/people of God" metaphor and those who use the charity/service metaphor are markedly more likely to want their parish to devote more attention to helping the poor outside the parish, to working to change unjust

socioeconomic conditions, to improving contacts with non-Catholic churches in their area, to making converts and reclaiming church drop-outs, and to improving the social life within their own parish. Those who view the parish as the agency for preserving and propagating the Roman Catholic faith, on the other hand, rate these as substantially lower parish priorities; in fact, the only high parish priorities they set concern enhanced religious education for pre-teens and teens.

One should not make too much of the differences noted here. Certainly most parishioners have plural expectations of their parishes. When they do participate in activities outside Mass, they do so across the range of different types of activities. They have roughly the same degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the spiritual and social life of the parish, regardless of the purpose they set for it. But when modest or marked differences in activities, religious practices, or parish priorities appear, the differences are at least partially traceable to the post-conciliar and pre-conciliar definitions of church that parishioners ascribe to parish.

Differences might not be accounted for solely by religious symbols. As we have mentioned, gender and generation do affect the use of religious symbols. Regional and local factors could also affect both the definition of parish and the priorities people set for their parishes. Our data indicate that parishioners in Southern and Midwestern parishes are slightly more likely to use the institutional model to define parish, while those in the Mid-Atlantic, Mountain, and Pacific parishes are slightly less likely to do so; it appears more often in the small city and town parishes than in the suburban parishes. Otherwise, regional and local differences are minimal; with the exception of the institutional model, each definition of parish is found proportionately in all regions.

Parish priorities are also quite similar by region and locale. Southern parishioners are more concerned about religious education at all levels and evangelism; those most concerned about social justice are, not surprisingly, in our black or mixed-race urban and rural parishes, and those least concerned are in the isolated parishes of the Mountain states. Otherwise differences in priorities attributed to region or locale are minimal. We are developing more sophisticated models to test whether a religious factor, such as the expectations one sets for parish, may be equal to or somewhat stronger than a social factor, such as parish location, in setting parish priorities in the minds of its members.

Foundational Religious Beliefs

Expectations of parish may make heavy use of a church's central symbols. Often these symbols are learned, and individual parishioners are conditioned to think of an institution like the local parish in certain ways. But, individual parishioners also have deeply-held religious values; theologians call these "foundational beliefs" These may be shaped to some extent by the symbols a church uses to socialize its adherents, but in a sense they exist even prior to the symbols of dogma or doctrine. Conceivably, foundational beliefs could have an impact on definitions of parish, participation in parish

activities, satisfaction with parish life, performance of specific religious practices, or establishment of parish priorities. One might argue that foundational beliefs set an agenda for the satisfaction of one's religious needs.

Our questionnaires have an important measure of "foundational beliefs" i.e., those beliefs and outlooks that probably are more fundamental than are the dogmatic symbols. From several options, respondents were asked first, to choose the one that expressed their feeling about the fundamental problem of human existence. From a second list, they chose the manner in which the problem could be overcome or the "path to salvation" From a third list, they selected the outcome of this process or the "outcome of salvation" Respondents were instructed to choose multiple options, if they wished, or to add other choices to any of these lists if the available choices did not capture their beliefs well. Then they drew arrows from one choice to another so that a problem-process-outcome sequence was depicted. The intellectual origins of the measuring device are found in the works of Milton Yinger and Clifford Geertz. A measurement procedure different from ours appears in Peter Benson and Dorothy Williams' remarkable study of *Religion on Capitol Hill*.

There are several themes found in Benson and Williams' book-length study of the fundamental beliefs of U.S. Congress members. For some, religion is *agentic*; it focuses on me and my problems. For others, religion is *communal*; it identifies the common needs of people in their social state. Religion is sometimes *vertical*, directed upward to or downward from God; at other times religion may be *horizontal*, directed outward to other people. The messages some hear in their religious values are *restricting*, setting limits, boundaries, regulations; for others the messages may be *releasing*, offering the freedom to experience something more fully, to do new things now that the past is forgiven. Some see religion as a source of *comfort*, a solace, an assurance, while others find in it a *challenge*, to serve, to transform persons or society. Individualism or social concern are likely to be identified especially in the agentic-communal distinction.

We have coded all parishioners in the CPL study by whether their religiosity is exclusively me-centered, whether it is exclusively social in orientation, or whether it combines the agentic and communal themes. In their deepest beliefs, 39% of core Catholics are exclusively *agentic* or self-centered and individualistic. They are concerned with their own shortcomings, how they act on God or God acts on them, and on the reward they will receive either in the afterlife or in this life. Another 18% are exclusively *communal*. They define the problem as alienation and social disharmony and they look to an outcome in terms of a peaceful and just social order. 21% are *integrated*; they define their religious values through both these themes. 22% represent anomalous patterns or could not think in these terms about religion.

Even though parishioners used communitarian language to define the parish, they use quite *self*-centered language when asked about the fundamental problems of human existence and how they are overcome. This is shown especially when we correlate scores on the agentic/ communal dimension with the seven definitions of parish. What we find is

that foundational beliefs predict little about the definitions of parish one will use; there is a slight tendency for those who define parish as a place for *personal* spiritual growth and as a place that offers worship and Sacraments to be more agentic, or self-centered, in their foundational beliefs. But the persistent differences between the mystical communion types and the institutional types are not foretold by foundational beliefs. Perhaps one of the reasons foundational beliefs do not predict well to parish purpose is that age and sex differences along the agentic/communal dimension are minimal; young Catholics and women are not *more* likely to be communal, as one might have suspected.

The lack of relationship between those two measures may, in fact, attest to the fundamental paradox of the Catholic church in the American setting. On the one hand, the symbols of Church are communitarian. On the other hand the values of the culture, the economy, and the polity are very self-centered and individualistic. Catholics use the symbols of the former to set expectations of the local church. Catholics use the values of the latter to describe their deepest religious concerns.

Where this paradox does become apparent is in the parish activities that are most consistent or least consistent with the agentic and communitarian themes. The Catholic parishioners who do engage in social welfare or social justice activities within their parish score considerably higher on the communitarian end of the dimension. The Catholic parishioners who engage in public activities devoted to personal spiritual growth and renewal score higher on the agentic end of the dimension. Thus, even though parishioners are pluralistic in their definitions of parish purpose, some of them will specialize in those parish activities that are most fitting to deeply-held religious values. Part of this pattern also appears with parish priorities. The Catholic who is more communitarian in her most deeply held beliefs is more likely to say the parish should give higher priority to helping the poor and changing unjust socioeconomic conditions. The Catholic who is more agentic is more likely to be interested in reclaiming dropouts and converting the unchurched. None of the other foci for parish priorities shows significant differences along the agentic/communal dimension.

Two of our later reports will look at the effects of individualism (a) on liturgical life and (b) on social ethics, church social teaching, and political attitudes. The paradox of a communitarian church in an individualistic culture becomes even more pronounced as we move inside the parish to its celebrations of common life and Sacraments, and then move outside the parish to the values core Catholics bring to their social and political involvements. Report 5 will begin the examination of liturgical life within the parishes.

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PREVIOUS REPORTS

Report #1
The U.S. Parish Twenty Years After Vatican II:
An Introduction To The Study

Report #2
A Profile of American Catholic Parishes and Parishioners:
1820s to the 1980s

Report #3
Participation in Catholic Parish Life:
Religious Rites and Parish Activities in the 1980s

Communitarianism is a philosophy that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community. Its overriding philosophy is based upon the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely molded by community relationships, with a smaller degree of development being placed on individualism. Although the community might be a family, communitarianism usually is understood, in the wider, philosophical sense, as a collection of interactions, among a community of people in a Therefore, religious beliefs need not be acceptable, logical, consistent, or comprehensible to others to be entitled to protection and courts must not presume to determine the place of a particular belief in a religion or the plausibility of a religious claim. In short, the fact that no religious group espouses such beliefs or the fact that the religious group to which the individual professes to belong may not accept such belief will not determine whether the belief is a religious belief. However, it is equally clear that Title VII was intended only to protect and accommodate individuals with View Communitarianism Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. Neoliberal communitarianism is the underlying rationale of a population management that operates both in an individualizing (citizenship as individual participation and responsibility) and a de-individualizing way ('community' at various aggregate and localized levels as frame of 'integration'). It thus combines a communitarian care of a Dutch culturally grounded national community – conceived as traditionally 'enlightened' and 'liberal' – with a neoliberal emphasis on the individual's responsibility to achieve membership of that community.