

Parishes

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But in the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council questioned whether strict adherence to boundaries was always healthy.

"Pastors began to allow for movement, with very few exceptions, inside and outside the boundaries," Father Clifford said. "They're not going to question it as long as you're an active participant."

In the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law, Canon 518 states:

"As a general rule a parish is to be territorial, that it embraces all the Christian faithful within a certain territory; whenever it is judged useful, however, personal parishes are to be established based upon rite, language, the rationality of the Christian faithful within some territory or even upon some other determining factor."

Canon 518 upholds territorial priority but also allows for greater flexibility, according to statements by the Canon Law Society of America in the *Code of Canon Law: Text and Commentary*.

"The advantages of territorial boundaries are that they define pastoral jurisdiction, e.g. assistance at marriages, and can only unify the community. Vatican II, however, recognized the limitation of territorial boundaries and exhorted parish priests to cooperate with others beyond the limits of their territories," the commentary stated.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark's views appear to reflect the canon law's intent. In a March 1993 *Courier* front-page story, Bishop Clark stated that newcomers should initially consider geographic boundaries when searching for a parish.

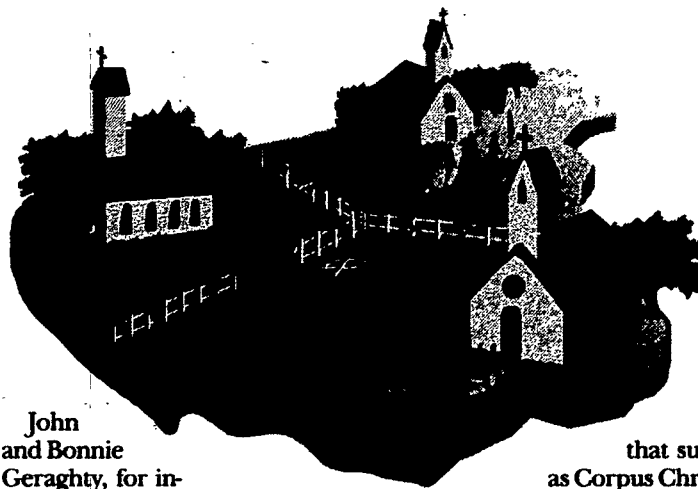
"A certain presumption is established in church law or custom that you become involved with your geographical parish community, and I would encourage people to move with that presumption: give it a good, fair try," Bishop Clark said in the article.

Yet he added that the faithful shouldn't automatically commit themselves to the local parish.

"The present reality, given the mobility of our society, means the actual fact is that a lot of people, for whatever reasons, make the decision to go somewhere else," the bishop said. "And I think that it would be foolish of me to quarrel with that."

Father McKenna observed that many Catholics, such as college students and families with summer homes, actually keep active affiliations with more than one parish.

"I'm not aware of anything that would exclude that," Father McKenna said.



John and Bonnie Geraghty, for instance, regularly attend St. Januarius Church in Naples when they're at their summer residence. They also split themselves between St. Joseph's Church in Rush and a parish in Florida.

"We donate to all three of them," John Geraghty remarked.

And in Cayuga County, Catholics have traditionally attended their parish of choice: It is the only part of the diocese that never established parish boundaries.

According to Father Robert Schrader, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Auburn, this is because most of Auburn's parishes were national churches — for example, St. Francis of Assisi was designated for Italian-Americans and St. Mary's for Irish. But these ethnic groups, he said, were spread all over town, making boundaries ineffectual.

Today, Father Schrader said, Auburn parishioners "could literally be living in the shadow of another Catholic church, and they could go somewhere else. They shop around; a lot of times people go based on the schedule or because they know somebody else who goes to the church."

What matters most?

On the other hand, Father Schrader observed, many other Catholics with long-standing ties to their local parish would never even think of shopping around.

"By and large, if their parents and grandparents went to a church, they'll go there too. People are committed to their parish," Father Schrader remarked. "They have a freedom to change, but they don't change their allegiances that quickly."

Father Clifford observed this mind-set during his stint with diocesan Parish Support Ministries from 1991 to 1995, when he oversaw the formation of several clusters. Using the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward in Rochester as an example, Father Clifford said that loyalty to a local church didn't change greatly

when clusters were established.

"For the most part people accept the new modeling, but they are still members of St. Augustine's Church," Father Clifford said. (St. Monica's and Our Lady of Good Counsel are the other churches in the 19th Ward cluster.)

However, Pickett noted that such Rochester parishes as Corpus Christi, St. Mary's and Our Lady of Victory are composed of members who live chiefly outside parish boundaries.

"It's not so much where the boundaries are. It's the relationship people develop within the parish community," Pickett said. "Maybe I need a different set of stimuli. What helps me, may not help you."

Father Clifford added that some worshippers come from two or three towns over to attend his Newark parish, or attend parishes two or three towns away.

"People might be looking for a style and quality of eucharistic celebration. If I'm not able to offer this to you, then by all means find somewhere else," Father Clifford said. "I think people need to do what they need to do."

But Father McKenna warned that people who travel the extra mile to attend a more distant parish might face problems when they seek ministerial services from their geographic parish.

"Pastors might bring up the fact to these people that they're technically members of another parish community," Father McKenna said.

Even so, Canon 518 ("a parish ... embraces all the Christian faithful within a certain territory") charges parishes with a responsibility to their local community regardless of residents' parish affiliation or participation level.

In fact, Father Lawrence Murphy, pastor of Holy Rosary Church, said that his parish's ministry encompasses his entire neighborhood.

"All the people who live within the boundaries are quasi-parishioners," Father Murphy said.

Regardless of geographic base, Father Clifford observed that parishioners should be inclined to serve their parish at the same level the parish serves them.

"How will I show myself to be a parishioner? How have I fully engaged my role as a parishioner?" Father Clifford queried.

What the future holds

Pickett said that parish boundaries will be even less emphasized as the strategic planning process deepens. The first wave of parishes in this four-year process is due to implement changes within their groupings this July.

"I guess I see that whole trend continuing — that lack of geographic identity," Pickett said.

"There will be a much more expansive type of parish community," Father McKenna added.

Father Murphy suggested that parishes concerned about their long-term survival may actually welcome the chance to combine resources with neighboring parishes.

"People are being encouraged to remain members of their particular church. But we have to be ready to collaborate, to share," Father Murphy said. His parish will initiate its changes this summer along with the other two churches in Holy Rosary's planning group, Most Precious Blood and Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Among that group's proposed changes are that the three parishes jointly hire and share a business manager, religious-education director and social ministry director; reduce the number of weekend Masses at the churches from 12 to nine and stagger the times so that worshippers can attend Mass at the most convenient time, regardless of which church they go to; create joint faith-sharing opportunities; and operate with one part-time and two full-time priests.

Initially, Holy Rosary's Kent said, some parishioners have balked at the idea of collaboration.

"People have their reservations; they can't help it," Kent said. "I was never really aware of the other parishes, per se. But we can't afford to do it like that anymore."

Father McKenna said that if the planning process yields church closings and further clustering, some parish boundaries may even be rewritten.

"It's possible that it could occur," he said. However, Father McKenna stressed that the boundaries won't be abolished.

"No matter how we re-configure, territorial boundaries will still be important for the sake of pastoral care," Father McKenna commented.

Rose Davis, pastoral associate at Holy Rosary, observed that the most pressing issue at hand is not geography, but to preserve parish communities.

"We struggle more with having enough priests than the makeup of parishioners," Davis said.

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