



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CLOSING CHURCHES

An Introductory Examination into Belgium, Italy, and the United States of America



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Introduction

Scholars have written on the decreasing religiosity (Pollack and Rosta, 2017), church attendance (Conway, 2013), and the determinations of Catholic priests to Catholic populations in Europe (Mourão, 2011). However, one area requires more examination, that being the phenomenon of parish and Church closures in Europe and the United States. Across these two regions, church leaders and populations are responding to a decreasing religiosity that has resulted in parish closures, alterations, and sometimes abandonment; however, no one country has responded the same, nor do they face the exact same issues. In order to discover what approaches are being taken, this paper will analyze three separate models of how dioceses and parishes, often directed by Episcopal Conferences, have responded to the aforementioned issues, and subsequent administration of church structures. The country models in question: Belgium, Italy, the United States, each inhabit different socio-cultural spaces as well as religious makeups; although they may possess glaring dissimilarities, each has been forced to respond to these changes. This paper will draw on research surrounding the cultural, social, and demographic circumstances and consequently will provide a deeper understanding of what is being done and why. Moreover, following examination, any lessons that can be learned from Belgium and Italy will be employed for better approaching an American Model as well as a brief suggestion as to further research.

Firstly, this paper does not seek to examine secularization theory, its addendums, modifications, or otherwise included items; such inclusions would eclipse the primary purpose of this paper: an examination of practical aspects that have caused church closures (e.g. declining attendance, inadequate ordained populations, low-fertility replacement rates) and the responses that various populations, peoples, and the Catholic Church in these countries have employed in accordance. However, the most recent and comprehensive study produced by Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta in *Religion and Modernity: An International*

Comparison promulgates a “multi-paradigmatic theory.” This “multiple theoretical perspective” (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 271, 2017) does not develop a universal theory, but rather is content, “with different theoretical perspectives,” which can, “help to illuminate both religious decline and religious revival” (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 435, 2017). Some theories include: the coupling thesis¹; the thesis of the simultaneous presence of the religious at different levels of society²; and perhaps most importantly for this discussion, the theory of differentiation and dedifferentiation,³ which will be discussed further on. These theses are not exhaustive; however, they are explicative of secularization theories of multifaceted, complex, and consistently reexamined nature. Incorporating such a discussion would be tangential to the more practical reasons for church closures and responses. That being said, some models will include an overture into sociological implications that affect overall church participation and attendance, such as the concept of functional differentiation, the importance of embedded Catholicism in Italy (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 144, 2017), embedded Catholicism in the United States (Adler, Bruce, and Starks, pg. 231, 2019) and Belgium’s societal differentiation (Conway, 2013). If further research is conducted, the sociological perspective associated with secularization theory and its ever-expanding components may be included.

Secondly, the limitation of this type of research is patent. This project’s brevity and overall depth of study lends itself to the conception of models in church closures. It should be considered an introductory investigation into how churches are responding and how their

¹ **The coupling thesis:** religious affiliation is in the main affected negatively by processes of individualization; religious ideas gain in persuasive power when the individual shares them with others—when he or she is involved in communal contexts, participates in church service, and has his or her faith confirmed through rituals and the institution (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 434, 2017).

² **The thesis of the simultaneous presence of the religious at different levels of society:** the capacity of religion to integrate is strengthened when it is simultaneously present at different levels at which society is constituted. Here, the likelihood of their simultaneous presence decreases the further the levels of society are pulled apart (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 434, 2017).

³ **The theory of differentiation and dedifferentiation:** when religion allies itself with other interests and identities, such as political objectives, efforts to rise socially, and regional affiliations, then its social relevance is very likely to increase (accumulation of interests hypothesis); when religious and non-religious interests diverge, then this is often accompanied by a decline in the importance of the religious (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 434, 2017).

responses differ. The differences can highlight cultural, historical, and regional differences. Further investigation could elucidate a deeper understanding of the issue and perhaps even guide discussion on cross-sectional study.

Canonical Background

In considering any examination of models and procedures, a background on what already governs the current entities is necessary. Firstly, Canon Law, the governing legal structure of the Roman Catholic Church, is organized most fundamentally by diocese; these dioceses are regional structures by which Catholic communities are organized (Can. 369). They are governed and administered by the Bishop, who is appointed by the Pope as Bishop of Rome and Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, and can establish, suppress or alter parishes in his diocese, (Can. 377 §1 and Can. 515 § 2), but, “he is not to establish, suppress or notably alter them unless he has consulted the council of priests.”⁴ Dioceses are subsequently divided into parishes (Can. 374 §1), which are, “a certain community of Christ’s faithful, stably established within a particular church whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor” (Can. 515 §1). In the context of pastoral care of a Church, the parish priest is the primary entity entrusted with maintaining and safeguarding a parish community. According to Can. 519, a parish priest,

“is [the] proper pastor of the parish entrusted to him. He exercises the pastoral care of the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, whose ministry of Christ he is called to share, so that for this community he may carry out the offices of teaching, sanctifying and ruling with the cooperation of other priests or

⁴ See e.g. Can. 495 §1 In each diocese there is to be established a council of priests, that is, a group of priests who represent the presbyterium and who are to be, as it were, the Bishop's senate. The council's role is to assist the Bishop, in accordance with the law, in the governance of the diocese, so that the pastoral welfare of that portion of the people of God entrusted to the Bishop may be most effectively promoted.

deacons and with the assistance of lay members of Christ's faithful, in accordance with the law.”

This parish community in an ecclesiastical sense is a territorial area, acting not autonomously, but rather existing within a large geographical framework as the smallest unit of the Roman Catholic Church (Adler, Bruce, Starks pg. 2, 2019). Although as aforementioned, parishes were normally confined to geographical boundaries, (Can. 518), they have since been identified as not limited to geographical distinctions (Adler, Bruce, Starks, pg. 3. 2019). In fact, especially in the United States, they are often a product of social circumstances (Adler, Bruce, Starks, pg. 3. 2019). For example, European immigrants traveled to the United States and coalesced around specific ethnic communities, feeling drawn to similar cultures (Qtd. In Adler, Bruce, Starks, pg. 3, 2019). Yet, other times, these parishes formed around common purposes and preferences (Qtd. In Adler, Bruce, Starks, pg. 3, 2019). This type of makeup sits in contrast to the “Old World of Europe,” considering the fundamentally different nature of the operative Church (in a historical as well as hierarchical aspect) it was generally organized by territories, so as to define boundaries and lines of certain populations (Hayward, 2013).

Furthermore, these parish territories and boundaries are an important consideration in parish reorganization. The diocese, as a regional organizational structure, includes parishes and within those parishes are churches that comprise the geographical Catholic community. If for any reason it is determined a church must close, Can. 512 §2 mandates that bishops undertake territorial restructuring and thus redrawing. In doing this, congregations must be reassigned, and the churches’ sacred contents must be relocated. These churches, defined in Can. 1214 as, “a sacred building intended for divine worship, to which the faithful have right of access for the exercise, especially the public exercise, of divine worship,” by their nature requires proper care, as their sacredness defined by the Church predisposes them to certain

uses (Can. 1205); however, in recent years, as identified in the 2018 Vatican Conference, “Does God Dwell Here Anymore?” there has been a large movement towards the decommissioning and sordid⁵ use of previously sacred structures. Further, in their press release, the conference participants stated, “Changing demographic and social situations and religious practice mean there is an excess number of churches in some places, with the consequent need for a different use,” (Doesn’t God Dwell Here Anymore?, Press Release). When these structures are relegated to a different purpose, as Can. 1212 outlines, they lose their dedication as a sacred space. The conference in response to these “redundant churches” (Rauti, 1989)⁶ offered recommendations to better direct church usage post-decommission, such as emphasizing collaborative care of churches by relevant experts and considerations for the social dynamics and circumstances of each community. These recommendations encapsulate only a small portion of the vast literature dedicated to study on use of churches;⁷ a country's specific circumstances, populations, and their cultural community heritage all influence the responses they may take.

⁵ Definitions for sordid and profane vary, especially regarding circumstance and subject matter. In every circumstance however, sordid is more egregious than profane. The *Code of Canon Law* in Can. 1222 §1 and 2 defines profane as use of a church for purposes other than define worship, such as community centres, schools, exhibition centres; in contrast, sordid use may include conversion of a church beyond worship and into the realm of licentiousness, such as bars, clubs, and otherwise vitiate activities. The Church has attempted to refine and delineate the line between sordid and profane in events such as the 2013 Congregation for the Clergy document, “Procedural Guidelines for the Modification of Parishes, the Closure or Relegation of Churches to Profane but not Sordid Use, and the Alienation of the Same,” as well the 2018 Conference, “Doesn’t God Dwell Here Anymore?”

⁶ As early as 1989, the Council of Europe commissioned a report on the redundancy of Churches in Europe, identifying an awareness of, “the very considerable number of religious buildings throughout Europe that no longer fulfill their original function and are therefore vulnerable through neglect to demolition or inappropriate transformation,” and, “noting that this continues to be the result of historic factors such as population shifts, changes in religious practices and habits, or even the construction of new buildings for religious use.” (Rauti, pg 2, 1989). Needless to say, this is not a newly breached topic.

⁷ For further reading, Thomas Coomans, “Reuse of Sacred Places: Perspectives for a Long Tradition,” extensively discusses this subject.

Demographic Background of the National Churches

In terms of the actual makeup of European and United States Catholic populations, the numbers vary. In Europe, Catholic populations have grown from 271,649,000 in 1980 to 286,868,00 in 2012 (Global Catholicism: Trends & Forecasts, pg. 9, 2015). However, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a research center for Catholic Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, indicates that the Catholic population of Europe, which had only grown about 6% since the 1980s, is expected to be 5% smaller in 2050. This is a result of, according to CARA's estimations, "sub-replacement rate fertility and immigration adding few Catholics to the overall population." In regard to European parishes, 138,828 operated in 1980, with 1,957 Catholics per parish; whereas in 2012, 122,159 parishes currently operate, with about 2,348 Catholics per parish. In the United States, the Catholic population has grown by 75% in the last 40 years, to about 77.7 million individuals in 2011 (The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes, pg. 8, 2012). Yet, similar to Europe, there also exists a relative decline in parishes. In 1980, around 18,700 parishes operated in the United States, but by the year 2019, that number has decreased to 16,914. Consequently, the aforementioned trends indicate a decrease in parishes among Catholic communities in Europe and the United States. What will be subsequently discussed is why these trends are occurring and how the specific countries of Belgium, Italy, and the United States have responded.

In evaluating the European models, the historical and societal environment they have and continue to exist can contribute a great deal to examining current statuses. Regarding societal structure, Italy and Belgium are identified as pillarized systems of Catholicity, or a situation in which societal institutions are organized along secular or religious interests (Conway, pg. 63, 2013; Dobbelaere, 1995). These pillars of societal organization, though once strong, have diminished as a result of institutional decoupling and increased modernization in the 1960s (Conway, pg. 62, 2013). Moreover, Belgium and Italy are not the

only countries in which this pillarization occurred; in part in response to the modernization brought on by the turn of the 20th century, societal pillarization's was implemented in Austria and Switzerland as well, and was intended to elicit, "autarky and self-sufficiency," (Dobbelaere pg. 231, 1999).

Consequently, these societal stratifications sit upon a more important concept that seeks to explain why the Church is now decreasing in both relevance and influence in these nations, i.e. secularization theory. Authors (Dobbelaere, K, 1999; Tschannen, O, 1991) have attempted to answer this question, but as Karol Dobbelaere notes: "secularization is not a causal concept, it describes the consequences of functional differentiation for the religious subsystem and expresses the interpretation of this experience by the religious staff," (Dobbelaere, pg. 231, 1999). Essentially, secularization theory acts as an indicator for the functional differentiation between secular and religious institutions, which results in a need for those previously operating entities within the religious sphere to meet the needs of their respective populations; this is not limited to Europe most assuredly, and although there may be disagreements and discord on firstly the cause and thereafter the long-term repercussions, there is an undeniable effect on religious populations (Pollack and Rosta, 2017; Conway, 2013; Dobbelaere 1989, 1991, 1999). Furthermore, as previously stated, the complexity of secularization theory is beyond the scope of this paper, but in understanding why societal stratification affects church commitment and thus attendance, the concept of functional differentiation requires exposure, as the primary progenitor of secularization (Dobbelaere, pg. 231, 1999). In Belgium as well as Italy's societal environments, this functional differentiation, begun at a societal level, is judged to develop together and eventually delineate Church and State processes, inherent in their relevant social functions. Karol Dobbelaere defines this process as such: "We then may define secularization as a process by which the overarching and transcendent religious systems of old is being reduced in a modern

functionally differentiated society to a subsystem alongside other subsystems,” and further: “[A]s a result, the societal significance of religion is greatly diminished,” (Dobbelaere, pg. 232, 1999). Once these processes break apart, the functions they serve become distinctly disconnected and work independently of religious control or guidance (Tschannen, pg. 400, 1991).⁸ Although it cannot and should not be directly inferred that these couplings are the primary reason between decreasing church commitment or attendance, they are informative in forming a historical and current sociological background for viewing the current situation.

Belgium, “A Shrinking Church”

Today in Belgium, about 50% of the population identifies as having an affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church (World Population Review), a severe decrease from over an 90% baptized Catholic population in the 1980s (Fox, pg. 2, 1982). Other religious denominations in Belgium number 2.5% for Protestants and other Christians, 5% Muslim, .4% Jewish population, .3% Buddhist population, 9.2% atheist, and 32.6% that claim no preference (World Population Review). Belgium’s Catholic community makeup includes 8 separate dioceses organized throughout the three regions of Belgium: Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels capital region (Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 66, 2016). Within those dioceses, there are 4,300 Catholic churches and 3,850 parishes (Michas, 2019). In Wallonia, just over 2,500 Churches existed, whereas roughly 1,750 were in the region of Flanders (Michas, 2019). Generally, these church buildings are owned and operated by municipalities.⁹ In regard to

⁸ Oliver Tschannen in his discussion on the separation of secular and religious institutions notes Talcott Parson’s (1964), “evolutionary universal,” which contains 1) vertical differentiation, stratification of hierarchical structure, 2) horizontal differentiation (between different social functions); and 3) different between culture and social structure - the differentiation of Christianity as a religious system (a cultural system) from the conception of a 'people' as a social system.” It is important to note that these approaches attempt to accommodate all societal circumstances, from small communities, larger hierarchical structures and even personal belief systems.

⁹ According to Linbald and Löfgren, churches built before 1795 are owned by municipalities or provinces and churches built thereafter are owned by the municipalities where they are built on public land. Religious practitioners have only the right of use of the buildings (pg. 66).

church closures, there does not appear to be any comprehensive national body that evaluates these churches, nor collects and categorizes religious buildings (Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 67, 2016). However, the study, “Religious buildings in transition: An international comparison,” conducted by Henrik Linbald and Eva Löfgren in 2016 emphasizes the primary debate in Belgium regarding church closures: declining attendance, financial burdens, and relative shortage of priests (Conway, pg. 64, 2013).

Before continuing, a brief digression is in order. Regarding pastoral care by priests, Can. 517 §1, 2, permits parishes to be bound together with several priests jointly administering, with one *primo inter pares* moderator for exercising pastoral care. Further, in the circumstance that no priest is available for entrusting pastoral care, a bishop may appoint a deacon or religious community to safeguard pastoral care, only with the caveat that there remains a priest who may exercise said care. In effect, according to the *Code of Canon Law*, a priest’s presence is imperative; however, for the United States populations, that later circumstances of joint pastoral care and care by the laity has been ever increasing (CARA, “FAQ”).

For example, in the United States in 1980, 791 parishes operated without an existing pastor in a 18,794-parish population, with about 11 of those run by a diocesan-appointed deacon or community of persons. By 2019, those 791 parishes without a resident pastor grew to 3,572 and the 11 parishes operated by deacons and/or community of persons grew to 378 (CARA, “FAQ”) CARA has identified that in the United States, there are many fewer priests to serve in the parishes across the United States, with fewer men ordained than needed to replace the aging priestly population (The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes, pg. 7, 2012). The situation in Europe is relatively the same, with exception of the commonplace practice of appointing deacons/communities of persons as custodians. The number of priests in Europe in 1980 numbered 243,319, and this number has since been reduced to 186,489

(Global Catholicism: Trends & Forecasts, pg. 9, 2012). Further, CARA identifies that 62% of parishes in Europe in 2012 have a resident diocesan priest, 7% administered by a resident religious priest, and 29% by a non-resident priest. CARA notes priest shortages as perhaps the biggest challenge to the European parishes. This has caused not only an increased need for ordained priests but a consideration to permit priests to marry; however, the Vatican has rejected such proposals (Lardieri, 2020).¹⁰ An attempt to accommodate these parishes has included usage of priests from Asia and Africa, where the number of priests is growing at a considerably larger rate than in Europe and the United States; however, this practice has received intense scrutiny over recent years, often claimed to be a form of “poaching” well-respected priests from less developed, but exponentially more populated Catholic populations (Mourão, pg. 429, 2013).

With all of this being said, the lack of priests is a considerably onerous circumstance, and because it spans regional boundaries as indicated above, its significance remains the same: regardless of country, the lack of ordained ministers’ results in more accommodations needing to be made without a sufficient supply to replace them. Since parish priests are the primary entity entrusted with administrative care, and because Can. 517 §2 mandates that even in the absence of a resident pastor and with the care potentially being given to a deacon/community of persons, a governing priest is still necessary, there will continually be a structural impediment to the maintenance of parishes and subsequently parishes.

¹⁰ For further reading on bereft European priest populations see e.g., Paulo Reis Mourão’s, “Determinants of The Number of Catholic Priests to Catholics In Europe—An Economic Explanation,” which offered an economic explanation for the bereft European priest population. It centered around four hypothesized: the tendency for increased income to accompany a decline in religious fervor may apply to young men finding it less socially/economically viable in a financially robust society (Mourão, pg. 428, 2011); a nation’s fertility rate if low will often predispose parents to encourage secular rather than religious career pursuits (Ibid, pg. 428-429); a proposition that young men avoid the priesthood for fear of commitment (Ibid); and finally, that a religious monopoly is responsible for the declining number of priests, and that as competition decreases, there is less incentive for priests (Ibid). Ultimately, it concluded that in those countries with increased income per capita, the priestly population tended to diminish and that nations such as Spain, Italy, and Ireland, were particularly affected by fertility rates, proportion of immigrants, and relative size of urban populations; it also offered an argument for an inelasticity of religious vocations as associated with income per capita, and that perhaps institutional factors could be given significant influential possibility.

However, in Belgium, the primary debate appears to revolve around church financing in buildings that no longer maintain large attending parish populations (Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 67, 2016). Likewise, explanations as to why this decline has occurred are numerous: socio-economic conditions in wealthy countries influence religious fervor and security (Norris and Inglehart 2004 qtd. in Conway, 2013); commitment to religion dependent on nearby religious persuasions (Stark, 1998; Jelen and Wilcox, 1998 qtd. in Conway, 2013); or the aforementioned coupling and differentiation theses which suggest that as secular and religious interests divert, so will religious commitment. In Belgium, considering the de-differentiation, this may very well be the case. One response identified was a policy proposal in 2013 that sought to merge churches to decrease competition (Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 67, 2016). However, what appeared to be more prominent in articles in addition to Linbald and Löfgren's study was the overwhelming policy of decommissioning churches, resulting in their subsequent conversion into a myriad of different uses, such as libraries, exhibition centres, or community centres (Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 67-68, 2016). Generally, these conversions were in a 2013 *National Catholic Reporter* article, it was referenced that over 108 churches were slated for decommissioning. The archdiocesan spokesman of Mechelen-Brussels, Fr. Tommy Scholtes, referred to this as a move that reflected, "community needs." (Luxmoore, 2013). Further, Fr. Scholtes stated, "[it was] not just a question of closing them, but also of knowing what to do with the communities attached to them." Considering those communities of Catholics still practice and attend church, likewise the regional custodial body, in this case the Belgian Conference of Bishops, must also attend to these concerns.

One prominent decommissioning that Linbald and Löfgren mentioned was the conversation of the Capuchin Monastery and monastic church in Mechelen, a city between Brussels and Antwerp. "The church was deconsecrated in 1999 and since 2010 has provided 79 hotel rooms of which the largest and most luxurious, the suite is located just above the

altar,” (Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 67, 2016). At other times, the establishment of “flagship churches,” which *Christian Today* identifies as the reorganization of boundaries in highly concentrated areas to increase Church attendance (Taylor, 2016). Recently, however, no identifiable conversions in the practice of church closures and reorganizing have been offered. This indicates a lack of cohesion and orderly response, as well as what Linbald and Löfgren refer to as the “infancy” of the conversion process. Ultimately, according to Linbald and Löfgren’s research as well as research conducted for the purposes of this paper, Belgium’s main response to declining church attendance and financial difficulties has resulted into a restructuring process that does not indicate a coordinated approach, nor a dominant model outside of sale or decommissioning.

Italy, “A Stronghold of Catholicism”

Italy, like Belgium, is a pillarized Catholic society; however, it also has a radically different experience with the Catholic faith. Referred to as a “Stronghold of Catholicism,” (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 144, 2017), Italy currently boasts over an 80% Catholic population (World Population Review) among a 60,000,000-national populace, with the second largest population, Islam, around 900,000 (Foreign Policy Institute, 2015, qtd. in Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 53, 2016). Other populations include about 700,000 Orthodox Christians, 500,000 Protestant denomination members, around 30,000 Jewish adherents and 100,000 Buddhists (Foreign Policy Institute, 2015, qtd. in Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 53, 2016). Beyond its pillarization, Italy’s cultural and political history have heavily influenced religious commitment and practice. Such things as the inextricably linked political and cultural history of Catholicism, in part due to the seat of the Catholic Church in Rome and, after 1929, in the independent city-state of Vatican City, contributed to Catholicism’s significant historical position. Further, Pollack and Rosta also identify a governmental power vacuum at the

terminus of World WAR II, permitting the Catholic Church to re-engage with the Italian populace (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 146, 2017).¹¹ This has resulted in what Pollack and Rosta refer to as, “an embedded Catholicism,” or, a circumstance of deeply intercultural entanglement between cultural and religious features of a country. Yet, just as Belgium differentiated between religious and secular functions, constitutional changes in 1947 separated church and state; further, a reaffirmation in the Concordat of 1984, signed by the Italian government and the Vatican, solidified the sovereign and independent nature of both institutions. Since the 1980s, religious affiliation has remained relatively stable and inhabited a particular constancy (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 146, 2017), yet other factors indicate at least a somewhat decreased religious commitment in, “baptized children and civil as opposed to church marriages.” Baptisms had an identifiable decrease, from nearly all children being baptized at birth in the 1980s to a 73 per cent rate (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 152, 2017) and civil marriages have doubled from their 19 percent proportional rate in 1996. Regarding church attendance, similar to Pollack and Rosta’s analysis, there has been relative stability since the 1980s, but recent studies have indicated downward trends affecting the Italian church, especially in regard to the redundancy of churches. (Vezzoni and Biolcati, 2015). Consequently, if there are no attendees, church officials must decide whether a church and by extension parishes are viable i.e. whether this church meets a specific need. If it does not, proper recourse is taken. It must be noted that neither of these factors can be wholly indicative of commitment and religiosity, but when viewed in light of the Italian parish and church situation, they are enlightening. Further, this also does not indicate a correlation specifically on church closures as a result of church attendance, especially considering the

¹¹ See Pollack and Rosta, pg. 146: “After decades of political restraint, the Catholic Church finally gained public visibility for the first time between 1943 and 1945. After the failure of the liberal state and fascism had become apparent with the demise of Mussolini, the transfer of Italy to the allies, and the dissolution of the army in the summer of 1943, the Catholics felt a greater need than ever to assume political responsibility. In one fell swoop, the Catholic Church was the only system of reference still functioning in Italy, and it drew the hopes of the population to it.”

subsequent discussion on churches, particularly their redundancy, which has been occurring since the 1980s.

As of 2016, Italy's church is divided into 224 dioceses and around 25,500 parishes (Crimella 2015, qtd. Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 53, 2016). Unsurprisingly, there are over 65,000 churches throughout the whole of Italy, owned and operated by the Catholic Church; yet, according to Linbald and Löfgren, there is a large majority of Catholic churches that have been abandoned and have fallen into disrepair as a result of urbanization, secularism, and the economic crisis of 2008, from which Italy is still suffering.¹² Unfortunately, these redundant churches are not a new issue and one that Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, has consistently recognized and responded.¹³ In 2018, at a meeting of the Italian Episcopal Conference, the Italian church's hierarchical body, Pope Francis highlighted issues the Conference faced: shortage of priests and the need to merge and consolidate dioceses. Francis stated: "The first thing that troubles me is the crisis of vocations," and further, an explication of Italy's unique position: "It is sad to see that this land, which has for long centuries been fertile and generous in producing missionaries, nuns, priest full of apostolic zeal, is entering alone with the old continent in a vocational sterility with searching for effective remedies" (Vatican Media, 2018). His suggestion was to, "make an exchange of *fidei donum* [priests] from one diocese to another," pointing out the Diocese of Puglia in the south of the country.¹⁴ The Diocese of Puglia, as well as other dioceses of Calabria,

¹² For further reading on Italy's economic crisis, see, "Italy and the Global Economic Crisis," by Robert Di Quirico from the University of Cagliari

¹³ In May of 2013, Pope Francis addressed the Italian Episcopal Conference regarding dioceses and their concurrent merging and consolidating. He references this discussion in his 2018 speech.

¹⁴ Pollack and Rosta identify a greater religious fervor in the South, but a larger clerical population in the North (Pollack and Rosta, pg 156, 2017). Luca Diotallevi in, "Internal Competition in a National Religious Monopoly: The Catholic Effect and the Italian Case," writes, "In the 20th century, "church oriented religion" spread more in the North than in the South of Italy. Data support this observation. The clerical workforce has held steady: there were 32.2 ecclesiastics per 10,000 inhabitants in the North in 1995 (+5.8 against the Italian average), 29.8 in the Center excluding Rome (-1.9) and 19.5 in the South (-35.8) (Diotallevi 1999b:80). In 1881 the figures were 32.3 ecclesiastics per 10,000 inhabitants in the North and 46.9 in the South (Salvemini 1940:214)" (Diotallevi, pg 139, 2002). This data seems to sit in contrast with Francis' suggestion to pull from the South to Northern dioceses, with data indicating a greater clerical/clergy population existing in the North as opposed to the South.

Campania, Basilicata, reside in Southern Italy, generally considered more religious comparative to the industrialized north (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 156, 2017), and as such would make sense to perform exchanges. That said, Pollack and Rosta as well as Luca Diotallevi in, “Internal Competition in a National Religious Monopoly: The Catholic Effect and the Italian Case,” write that religious fervor, although stronger in the South, does not possess a greater clerical population (Diotallevi, pg. 139, 2002). In fact, there are 32.2 ecclesiastics per 10,000 inhabitants in the North as opposed to 19.5 per 10,000 in the South (Diotallevi, pg. 139, 2002). Nevertheless, Francis’ suggestion is still emblematic of a Church in need of priests.

Further, Pope Francis addressed the concern of the “reduction and merging of dioceses,” one to which he ascribes, “certainly a pastoral need” (Pope Francis, 2018). Regarding what to do with these churches, *The Italian Insider* in an article published in November of 2018 referenced Pope Francis’ openness to sell these churches for the poor and disenfranchised, saying: “In the past few years, many churches have become redundant, due to the lack of believes or clergy, or a changing distribution of the population in cities and rural areas,” and further, that: “This must be welcomed in the Church, not with anxiety, but as a sign of the times” (Middleton, 2018). Essentially, if there are a redundant number of churches no longer serving Catholic populations, consider their sale in order to assist the poor, but this sale should not and, “must not be the first and only option” (Middleton, 2018).

Certainly, these issues are at the forefront of the Italian church situation, especially considering the meeting of the Vatican-sponsored conference “Does God Dwell Here Anymore?”. The Conference also concluded that the concern over church usage after, “demographic contraction of many communities, the changing distribution of populations, the increased mobility of people, and a related change in the way the faithful belong to a territory and to traditional territorial ecclesiastical institutions” (Does God Dwell Here Anymore?, 2018). The conference also referenced the roughly thirty-year-old document, *A*

*Charter on the Use of Former Sacred Edifices*¹⁵, published in 1987, which sought to deal specifically with the decommissioning of Churches in Italy. Further, the 1989 *Report on Redundant Religious Buildings*, identified a “considerable number[s] of redundant religious buildings in France, Spain, and Italy (Pauti, pg. 16, 1989). Therefore, it is neither a new issue nor one in which the Italian Catholic Church has an immediate answer, considering the expectation of overall population decrease in Europe as well as the Catholic population (Global Catholicism: Trends & Forecasts, pg. 9, 2012).

Recent instances of church closures and concurrent parish closures were also analyzed in Linbald and Löfgren in, “Religious buildings in transition: An international comparison.” They identify that older churches are being abandoned, new churches are still being built in in the major city areas, and further write: “The building stock is declining, but is being built up continuously in this way” (Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 54, 2016). They cite Rome as a prominent example: 900 churches exist within the city, with 600 having disappeared over the centuries; 400 churches, chapels, and oratories are in the ancient city and about 300 outside the city walls, most of which originated in the 1900s (Magnusson, pg. 91, 2001; qtd. in Linbald and Löfgren, pg. 54, 2016). Another issue that is plaguing the Italian Church is regarding funding and finances for century old churches, brought on by an economic crisis that has made it difficult to fund their restoration. Beyond this research, a comprehensive strategy and/or guide to Italian parish closures and restructurings was difficult to discover; more common however was the concept of adaptation for these redundant churches following their decadence¹⁶ and disrepair.¹⁷ Nevertheless, suggestions were made, as indicated by Pope

¹⁵ Central Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy, “Carta sulla destinazione d’uso degli antichi edifici ecclesiastici / Charte sur l’utilisation des anciens bâtiments ecclésiastiques,” October 26, 1987, Rome, in *Arte cristiana*, 75, 1987, 410-412.

¹⁶ Decadence refers to a state of increasing underutilization of Churches across a country; although it is a not linear indication of overall decreased influence, it suggests a downward trend.

¹⁷ For further reading: a research study, “Redundant Churches: a toolkit for a strategy of reuse,” developed by Lucia Miglietta, Matteo Robiglio, Andrea Longhi, Laura Galluzzo, and Lucia Baima, sought to approach this issue, indicating the very real problem of redundancy and declining populations in Italy as well as in Western

Francis' address; yet, the redundancy of underutilized and underfunded parishes is another circumstance that neither the Church nor the populace know how to contend and one which is anticipated to grow (Miglietta et al., 2019).

The United States of America, “A Changing Face”

Consequently, both Belgium and Italy are facing the challenges of a changing world and changing demographic trends, wherein their responses are dependent on the population they serve and the resources they have available. Moving to the United States, the issues faced include one that is thoroughly contemporary and one that reflects a different environment, demographic, and historical perspective. Pollack and Rosta identify the United States as a much different entity with regard to religious persuasions and inclinations, although still possessing concomitant “weakening church ties and religious practices,” and yet did not acquiesce around a pillarized society (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 287, 2017). Pollack and Rosta conclude that although religious commitment is decreasing, there remains large vitality. Pollack and Rosta elucidate that the distinct positioning and absent centralization in effect produce a greater autonomy of local religious units, hence the continued vitality of Catholicism in the United States.¹⁸ Essentially, the United States inhabits a distinct sociological and historical sphere that defines the interplay between religious groups as well as the communities with which they interact. Yet, the United States' Catholic faith population

Europe as a whole; and further, “Adaptation of redundant churches to alternative uses in the Italian context,” by Frattari, A.; Albatici, R, which deals with, “research carried on at the Laboratory of Building Design of the University of Trento called “Renaissance Opportunity for Redundant Churches” which objective is to formulate guidelines that can be useful both by architects and by the public administrators to understand how to properly use church buildings and to adapt them especially to housing uses achieving sustainable interventions, so that the historical, architectonic and formal values of the building are preserved and the religious meaning and representation are not distorted. One meaningful example in the Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy) is shown and discussed.

¹⁸ Specifically, they write: “The higher level of religious vitality in the US is therefore based not on free competition between religious communities in an unregulated market, but on the greater autonomy of local religious subcultures brought about by less centralization and standardization, subcultures where religious actors operate relatively independently of trans-regional influences, and where they can mutually confirm each other's religious interpretations of the world and practices” (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 330, 2017).

is growing when compared to Europe, indicating a need for larger parishes to accommodate such population growth. (The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes, pg. 9, 2012).

In regard to population, the United States, unlike Belgium and Italy, does not possess a Catholic majority; rather Protestant populations represent a majority of the country at around 47% whereas Catholic's represent 20% of the population (Pew Forum). Moreover, as aforementioned, the number of parishes stands at 17,784, with a consistent downward trend, especially in the regions of the Northeast¹⁹ and Midwest²⁰. CARA identified in, "The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes," that over the last decade (from 2010), there has been a 7.1% percent decline, generally in the past concentrated areas of the Northeast and Midwest United States, with an uptick in parishes in the Southwest²¹ (See Figure 1) area of the United States, indicating not only CARA's assessment that communities have since moved out of the Northeast but what Pollack and Rosta identify as increased immigration that has largely replaced the dwindling Catholic populations (Pollack and Rosta, pg. 299, 2017). Pew Research Center concurred stating that a significant portion of immigrant populations are Catholic and will continue to grow (Lipka, 2015). Even mass attendance has remained relatively stable, coupled with a growing Catholic population, suggesting increased demands on parishes as the real number of Catholics attending and needing sacraments increases" (Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes, pg. 10, 2012).

And yet, parishes are still declining, reflecting a change of Catholic populations in the Northeast and Midwest. CARA states recently that populations have moved from the Northeast/Midwest and instead have begun to move towards the Southwest, in addition to the aforementioned immigrant population. Consequently, needs must be met, and parishes must

¹⁹ Generally defined as the 11 states of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

²⁰ The Midwest area is generally defined as Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Indiana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Illinois, and Nebraska.

²¹ The National Geographic Society as of 2020 defines the Southwest as Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma.

be reorganized to meet a dwindling population in one area of the country and a growth in the Southwest.

What these changes have resulted in is a categorization of the United States' current parishes restructurings, categorized by four major subgroups: multicultural parishes, multi-parish ministry, consolidated parishes, and PLC (the previously mentioned Can. 517.2 law that permits deacons or communities of persons to care for the parish). For this paper's purposes, consolidated parishes can be defined as: 1) the parish was created (erected) as the result of a merger with at least one other parish; or 2) parish membership or territory was affected by the closing or suppression of a parishes; and multi-parish ministry: Parishes experiencing multi-parish ministry indicated that the parish is clustered, linked, yoked, twinned, paired, or are sister parishes with at least one other parish (The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes, 2012). Interestingly enough, the percentage of consolidated parishes is highly concentrated in the Midwest (53%) and Northeast (36%) and overall, 27% percent of parishes in the United States are clustered or linked (The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes, pg. 3, 2012).

Moreover, parishes in the United States have developed some Church reorganizing procedures, such as in the Diocese of Davenport in Iowa. This diocese outlines four possible parish modification paths: extinctive union (merger): A and B unite to form C, only C remains; extinctive union (amalgamation): A is subsumed into B, only B remains; total division: A is divided into B and C, only B and C remain; or suppression: A is extinguished; nothing remains (Amos, Diocese of Davenport, 2014). Furthermore, the diocese outlines procedures with which to approach closures of churches and the relegation of churches to profane but not sordid use, that is, relegation to use beyond its original purpose, which is consequently not worship. Moreover, the diocese indicates grave causes for modification, which by themselves are not sufficient reasoning for parish alternation: general plan to reduce

number of churches, church is no longer needed, parish has been suppressed, number of parishioners has decreased, closure will not harm the good of souls, a desire to promote the unity of the parish, some potential future cause that has not actually happened yet (Amos, Diocese of Davenport, 2014). Conclusively, developing a process for the restructuring and reorganizing of parishes, based on a set of circumstances and caveats permits greater scrutiny to be given among the endeavor and likewise, the needs of both the community as identified by the bishop and council of priests must be compared to the guidelines.

In the United States, the situation is complex regarding parish culture. As aforementioned, parish communities in the past tended to be concentrated by ethnic communities. For those individuals, these parish communities, “occupy the embedded middle of American Catholicism,” and those, “individual Catholics come together to create a local identity with a global Catholic Church” (Adler, Bruce, Starks, pg. 231, 2019). Understandably, any parish restructuring requires community consideration, as happened in the early 1990s experiences in Philadelphia and Chicago, where the restructuring occurred through, “cluster pastoral planning,” or:

parishes grouped according to geography and "perceived affinity" were encouraged to "work together by sharing information and coordinating activities, by sharing ministry through programs, by sharing personnel, and by planning together for a more authentic, faithful, and vital expression of lived church life than any one...could provide on its own" (Rzeznik, pg. 85, 2009).

Another example of recent restructuring occurred in 2019 in Chicago, where the current 316 parish makeup was a reduction from 477 parishes in 1975. The article, “From sacred to secular: What happens when a Catholic church shuts down?” in the *Chicago Tribune* outlines restructuring as a result of neighborhood demographics, fewer parishioners and priests resulting in needing to reorganize and restructure parish communities (Fazio, 2019).

Moreover, *The Chicago Tribune* outlines another initiative taken, referred to as the Renew My Church Program, “a campaign aimed at structural change and spiritual renewal of the Catholic Church in the Chicago area (Fazio, 2019). Needless to say, the fact that divergent approaches, such as the Renew My Church Program as well as the cluster pastoral planning indicate different needs being met for different communities. Furthermore, considering the United States’ large geographical position and widespread diocesan Catholic communities, each respective community must meet different needs. What a parish community in Philadelphia may need is radically different from what the parish community in Houston, Texas may need. For example, Texas is one of the Southwestern states that possesses a relatively large immigrant population, with the American Immigrant Council identifying 1 in 6 Texas residents being immigrants (American Immigrant Council, 2020). Moreover, as aforementioned, a majority of immigrants are Catholic, meaning that when new populations arise, concurrent accommodations must be met, which CARA identified in parish numbers between 2000 and 2010 (a net change between 11-41 positively according to CARA; see figure 1). The Northwest area, by contrast, is not receiving a Catholic influx, nor a significant immigrant influx. Thus, reordering and restructuring of parishes and churches is heavily reliant on the bishop’s discretion as well as the parish council of priests. This is true both in the United States as well as Europe, so in forming any comprehensive understanding of approaches and models, bishops provide ultimate discretion in parish restructuring and organization.

Conclusion

A comparative study of these models is evidently difficult, considering resources, methods, and application; however, regarding aforementioned research, it is patent that each country is approaching their church response structures differently. Each country's model is

one designed to meet the needs of the community they serve, but those needs are invariably different.

Belgium's approach is dictated by a declining church population, a shortage of ordained priests, as well as a regionally-bound financial burden. The primary approach appears to be a decommissioning of churches and selling churches that no longer have a populace they serve; decreasing religious commitment and overall church attendance is pervasive among the Belgian populace, resulting in a parish community that no longer needs to be served. Therefore, they may see no need to maintain large churches for a population of religious individuals that are continually decreasing and are expected to continue as secularization is expected to continue; yet, small attempts at consolidation models to incorporate displaced congregations and likewise are being implemented in, "flagship churches," designed to attract congregations as "beacons" in the center of towns.

Italy, as a "Stronghold of Catholicism," maintains a relatively committed and robust populace, but possesses redundant churches, with a large portion being slated for decommissioning as well as selling. With a low fertility replacement rate and decreased baptisms since the 1970s, there is not a young Italian populace, religious or not, which attends the multitudes of churches throughout the whole of Italy. Moreover, churches are still being built, indicating an equivocal direction for comprehensive responses; Pope Francis' address suggests an openness to selling churches, but also implies a reticence to merging and closing dioceses for fear of disrupting Italian communities.

The United States inhabits a unique atmosphere as aforementioned; its population is moving and thus must respond concurrently to meet the needs of these communities. For restructuring, there appears to be some responses taken in a more comprehensive manner, perhaps built on the embedded Catholicism that defined the United States' parish culture. Dioceses are attempting to respond by outlining proper procedures and considerations to be

taken, with the expectation that parishes and churches will continue to close. Churches themselves are receiving community respective responses, and thus formulating a comprehensive model may prove difficult; the discretionary nature of canonical custodianship limits such changes.

Comparing these approaches is dependent on information available, but consequently because of their vastly different cultures and circumstances, each country has responded differently. Nevertheless, merging and consolidating of parishes among each country seems an approach taken, and one that attempts to accommodate the needs of their respective communities; yet if there is no community to respond to, such as the case in Belgium, there may be no need to merge these communities. Otherwise, sale and decommissioning of buildings is the prime avenue, as is the case in Italy. Whether they are being sold for financial reasons as is the case in Belgium or upon Pope Francis' suggestion for gifting to the poor, the actual quantifiable data is lackluster, indicating again, a rather uncoordinated approach. The very existence of the 2018 Conference, "Does God Dwell Here Anymore?" is indicative of a lack of coherent design and response mechanism that can properly accommodate these changes; and even more importantly, should there be? As stated, prior, each community is responding to variably different circumstances and the imposition of certain standards may prove more pernicious than salutary.

As for the United States, sale of churches did not appear to be the prominent approach, but rather a move towards consolidating and restructuring parochial areas as well as an increased need for in the Southwest considering the decreasing populations in the Northeast and Midwest. Moreover, as compared to Belgium and Italy, the United States is the only population that has a growing Catholic population and a subsequent growing need for both parishes and priests, especially in the Southwest. Furthermore, the disparate approaches to church hierarchical structure in the United States comparative to Europe, as well as

parishes built around general community boundaries and ethnic populations rather than territorial boundaries, the actions by respective parish communities and consequently bishops will reflect such an understanding. As to what can be learned, Italy and Belgium both have decreasing populations and habits towards decommissioning churches, which as whole in Europe tend to be older and contain precious artifacts (Linbald and Löfgren, 2016). The United States, as CARA indicates, has had at least a third of its parishes erected in the 1950s, and the average age at 1922 (The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes, pg. 13, 2012). As to what can be learned, it appears the United States is responding in a more-comprehensive manner than Europe, providing appropriate responses and pathways for reordering and reconstruction; Europe can be an indication of what could happen if religiosity in the United States is to weaken further, perhaps resulting in a decadence and redundancy. Responses taken by communities should be respective to populations, and if there is not a need to build need churches, perhaps the consolidation of parishes is an approach that should accommodate local need.

Each region suffers immensely from decreasing priestly populations, CARA identifies both in *Global Catholicism: Trends & Forecasts* (Pg. 6 and 9-10) as well as the *Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes* (Pg. 7); considering the need for parishes to be directed by a priest, even if run by a custodian (deacon or community of persons), the continued legal demand ascribed by Canon Law will exacerbate the stress on a dwindling priestly population that both the United States (in the Southwest) and European populations possess. If changes were to be made, alternatives to Canon Law should be made to accommodate parishes that no longer can afford to utilize priests, so that they may employ lay persons, deacons, or other committed members of the parish communities. However, such a conversation is beyond the scope of this paper.

Interestingly enough, the Vatican recently publicized a document produced by the Congregation for the Clergy regarding, “Parish at the service of evangelization” In it, the emphasis is on a renewal in parochial understanding (Piro, 2020), and encourages, “co-responsibility of the baptized and to promote pastoral care on the closeness and cooperation between parishes (Piro, 2020). Needless to say, the Vatican’s continued overtures and recommendations into the revitalization of parish life as well the dynamism among the Catholic Church certainly indicates an awareness of this issue, but the Vatican also remains firm in stating: “the document [Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church", of the Congregation for the Clergy, 20.07.2020] does not promulgate any new legislation, but proposes methods to better apply existing rules and canonical norms (Piro, 2020).

If this analysis were to be taken further, I would suggest an investigation into parish communities and parish community leaders themselves. In the U.S., dioceses are less stratified, and leaders must meet community needs that differ from their colleagues; whereas in Italy and Belgium, the Belgian Bishops Conference and Italian Episcopal Conference are regional church entities who are actively engaging with these issues. Gathering information and first-hand accounts from the individuals who are making these decisions would provide perhaps a clearer line of thought and response system that makes the entire parish/church closure so complex.

In addition, incorporation of other countries and their respective regions in this discussion may also permit a more comprehensive lens with which to view not only secularization theory as it relates to these entities, but further issues that affect these and other countries. A prime example would be a discussion as to how COVID has since affected churches and parishes and whether churches themselves have undergone exponentially decreased mass attendance, considering environmental as well as contact restrictions.

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