

**Shaping Parish Life:
Ongoing Influences of Vatican II and the Catholic Common Ground Initiative
as Envisioned by Father Philip Murnion**

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The anniversaries of several momentous events have been instrumental in bringing us together tonight. We celebrate with joyful remembrance the 50th anniversary of Msgr. Phil Murnion's ordination and with lingering heartache the 10th anniversary of his death. How he would have loved to commemorate the 50th anniversaries of his ordination and of Vatican II! That life-changing event captivated his energy and enthusiasm in ways that led him to the forefront of many advances and improvements in church ministry. High on the list of his attention was parish life. During his many years of ministry he contributed extensively and meaningfully to the shape of parishes as we know them today. In honor of that great devotion this presentation will focus on the topic of parish life – what it was like in the past, how Fr. Murnion helped it to evolve, and its present condition. We might even venture a few thoughts about future possibilities and prospects.

When Father Murnion was ordained on June 1, 1963, the Church was in the initial stages of momentous change. The first session of Vatican II signaled a fresh vision that must have thrilled the newly ordained priest. The early documents and general atmosphere emanating from Rome in those days heralded transformation of so many aspects of church life that would engage Phil for the next forty years.

In order to paint a picture with numbers, allow me to provide some of the essential data. What were the numbers and features related to parishes in the U.S. around 1963 and how do those numbers compare to 40 and 50 years later?

In 1963 **the number of priests** was 56,540, just short of the peak year of 1967 when there were nearly 60,000 (59,892); 40 years later, in 2003, there were 44,487 priests, 12,000 fewer and now, just under 40,000, the number is 39,718, a drop of 16,000.

For **sisters and brothers** the change in 40 years was even more dramatic with 103,000 fewer sisters (from 177,154 to 74,698) and 6,000 fewer brothers

(from 11,968 to 5,568); now the numbers have dropped even further to 55,045 (-122,000) and 4,737 (-7,000).

As astounding as these figures are, during the same time period **the number of Catholics** has increased from 43.9 million in 1993 to 66.4 million in 2003 (up 22.5 million) and 68.2 now (up 24.3 million).

Just as startling, **the number of parishes** to accommodate these extra 24.3 million the number of parishes has barely changed: 17,298 in 1993, 19,484 in 2003 and down to by over 1,000 to 18,061 at present. Thus the average number of Catholics per parish rose from 2,538 to 3,408, to 3,776, which amounts to 1,250 more per parish now than 50 years ago.

Lay ministers were not really counted until the 1970s and then numbered only an estimated 5,000, in contrast to the 40,000 or so who serve in parishes these days. Deacons numbered around 900 in 1975, a few years after the permanent diaconate was restored, and their numbers today are nearly 18,000.

At the time Father Murnion was ordained, few would have imagined the transformation that was about to begin in parishes. What was **the 1963 parish** like? Perhaps most striking was the composition of the personnel, those who ministered in the parish. Typically, in 1963, the pastor was over 50 and well-seasoned, having served as an assistant for at least 25 years. If as a young priest he was a good observer, he was probably quite prepared for a pastorate, but it was the fortunate few who were really mentored by the pastor. Typically the duties of the newly ordained included teaching in elementary and secondary schools, and then he waited for some other tasks to be assigned. As for the liturgy, Mass was celebrated in Latin, the priest faced the altar with his back to the congregation, and participation in worship was limited to a few Latin responses that the young boy servers stumbled through.

Meanwhile parish schools flourished in almost every parish of reasonable size, led by and staffed by sisters (in rather elaborate habits) at all levels, often up to twenty or more in the convent. Fifty children were crowded into all too many classrooms in that era. The sisters' responsibilities usually included many other tasks around the parish: teaching "catechism" classes on Saturdays to children not attending Catholic schools, caring for the sacristy and altar linens, training servers, organizing fund raisers for the school, etc. Having more than one or two lay teachers employed in the Catholic school was unusual. Deacons? These were the young men awaiting ordination. It would be ten years from 1963 before the first

permanent deacon was ordained. Lay ministers? The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, was two years off (1965); significant involvement of the laity in parish ministry was still a decade or two away.

It was in the context of this representation of the typical parish of 1963 that Fr. Murnion began his priesthood. Not surprisingly, Phil's pathway into ministry didn't quite follow the "typical." Three months after his ordination he was on his way to our nation's capital to join in Dr. Martin Luther King's March on Washington. No doubt inspired by his first assignment to a black parish in Harlem, he had first-hand experience with civil rights and anti-poverty movements, and later taught at a Catholic high school. With his creativity, energy, and keen powers of observation, themes from these early assignments would show up in his later work with the National Pastoral Life Center, the Catholic Common Ground Initiative and in many other settings on many different occasions.

Engaged in more varied and involved ministry experience than most and equipped with a doctorate in Sociology from Columbia University, for the next forty years Phil embarked on a path that changed forever the model of parish ministry. The volume of Phil's activities, writings, and published lectures is so vast that it is not easy to summarize his philosophy and vision. To refresh our memories of what he cared about, I read through the last ten years of his editorials in Church magazine, along with numerous articles. The breadth of this great man's mind is astounding. He covered every conceivable topic related to bringing about effective parish ministry, among other goals. I chose several recurring themes that remind me of Phil's message, and I hope they will sound familiar to you, too.

The theological theme of "Incarnation" permeated his writings. It is quite evident that Christ was his intimate and constant companion. Though he was not one to display his piety, he was a deeply spiritual person. At Christmas in 1999, he spoke of being "preoccupied these days with the original mystery and continuing mystery of the Incarnation...the wonder of who He (Jesus) was, the love that bore him, and the consequences for who we are." (Winter 1999) He described its meaning in vivid language. "The crucifixion is, of course, the ultimate expression of the Incarnation, the self-emptying of Jesus," he wrote. Self-emptying – a word that captures his spirit of generosity in serving everyone and everywhere if he possibly could respond. In his poem that followed, he spoke of the Incarnation coming "In the fullness of time" and he expressed hope that in spite of the fact that this coming may be in the midst of uncertainty (and I paraphrase):

“It will never be the right time,
it will never be very much better”
but yet “there’s consolation,
No, encouragement...” because even though
 “I am not the right one
 nor are you
But all of us are all we have
 to discover together
 That the Lord’s here
Before we miss the moment
 And it’s too late.”

It was all about relationship with Christ and with each other.

A year later he returns to the theme in another context and introduces another central theme: The Incarnation inaugurated a divine-human dialogue that resonated from the depths of being—the being of God and our own being—and **calls us into dialogue.**” As anyone who knew Phil remembers, promoting dialogue was vital to him. He plunged himself into the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. Without his leadership, it would never have gotten off the ground nor thrived in the ways it has. He always thought in terms of both/and rather than either or. He was a person who sought unity with the most disparate elements of church imaginable.

Phil appreciated, through his own experience and in his interactions with pastors and other parish ministers, the range of beliefs and viewpoints parishioners held; he recognized their varied perspectives and pathways to God; and he acknowledged their spiritual needs and diverse expressions of their faith. Reconciling differing positions of liberals and conservatives and bringing them together to engage in dialogue was a passion for Phil. He envisioned a time when the principles of Common Ground would be practiced at every level in the church. With Sr. Catherine Patton, he organized conferences – dialogues – with some of the most unlikely characters on some difficult topics, like authority in the church, varied understandings of the Eucharist and liturgical practice, sexuality and life issues from conception to death. Eventually the depth of the struggle became even more apparent. At one point he lamented, “How curious and sad that ‘dialogue’ has become a divisive word among us! What a waste of a gift!” (Summer 2000) About the relationship between bishops and priests, he said, “I find that the healthiest spirit – where fellowship in faith, hope, and charity is reflected in mutual

challenge, support, and a sense of humor – is where the priests with their bishop candidly discuss the issues facing the church.” (Summer 2000)

From beginning to end, Fr. Murnion urged what he referred to as “**partnership**,” that is, cooperation and collaboration at all levels of the Church, with the Pope, bishops, priests, staff, and parishioners. Partnership was one of his favorite words to connote mutual participation and this practice, he said, was becoming a more common feature in church life. He was acutely aware of the work of lay ministers and commended their ministry as essential in parish settings. Behind the good relationships, he emphasized, was the necessity of shaping the day and shaping our lives through relationship with Christ.

The intent of being in relationship, of partnering, was to ensure the health of the parish. Phil began his Winter 2002 editorial by quoting from a 1981 statement of the bishops, “**The parish is for most Catholics the single most important part of the church.**” In numerous articles throughout his life, he reiterated the value of the parish and discussed ways to analyze and organize for the greatest impact. In the last editorial, published after his death, he wrote, “Besides defining and expressing the identity of the individual as sacred, relational, and responsible, parishes define the world in ways that will affect one’s involvement with the world.” (Winter 2003) He was always conscious of the wide variety of parish structures and practices with their prevailing ecclesiologies. He described those with centralized authority and devotional piety on one side and egalitarian style with a social dimension and broad participation on the other. Yet he was attentive to the needs of all and looked for that which united rather than that which divided: “At the center of the continuum lies the parish that is, by definition, pastoral, by which I mean an effort to be: accountable to official teaching and norms but accommodating to local cultures and individual needs; attentive to the demands of personal piety and morality as well as to social morality and spirituality; authentic in its teaching and worship and very pragmatic in its programming.”

Fr. Murnion concluded, “The parish is a mystery of faith.” He pointed out that individual situations were affected by:

- local area, race and nationality of the people
- their age, sex, and education
- their attitudes and experiences.

Based on that reality, his instinct was to teach the necessity of **analyzing the parish setting** if pastoral ministers were to respond appropriately to the congregation to which they were responsible. The analysis always focused on the pastoral dimensions, with the Eucharist at the heart of it. Using the image of the Body of Christ for the Church, he insisted that church design and worship practice should make clear the relationship between word and sacrament, the congregation and the presider, the spiritual and physical, and material reality and action. Thus he concluded, “Our gathering in the Eucharist and our going out to the poor are intrinsic to each other.” (Spring 2001) It was that understanding of Eucharist that shaped Phil’s life. He was one with the poor. “Pastoring,” he maintained, “requires constantly reaching out to those who are not part of the community and especially those who are most marginal, most distressed, most in need. It means enabling parishioners to be missionary in their families, work, and communities – bringing the life, meaning and message of Jesus and his Gospel to all they do.” (Winter 2003)

To achieve that end he stressed that certain **organizational requirements** had to be met in order for a parish to function well; in the many educational settings he helped structure, components of effective administrative practice were imparted. One piece of advice was imparted by a particular story, “Once I was accused of ‘having an agenda.’ My reaction was to say: ‘Noooooooooooo!’ Of course I have an agenda. Don’t you worry about those who either profess they don’t or actually don’t have an agenda. **Doesn’t having an agenda mean having a mission that is more than wishful thinking?**” (Fall 2001)

These themes are just a few of the many that Phil attended to throughout his life, but he already recognized them in one of his earliest publications, *Forming the Parish Community*, published by the USCC in 1977. As I was examining the data on the state of parishes today and the trends that are emerging, I was struck by the correspondence between the areas that Phil raised at that time and concerns of today. He noted that “the young and well-educated are much more likely to become disaffected from the faith and church than their predecessors.” (p.15) (Some 35 years of the PEW study on the same topic.) He talked about the movement from territorial parish membership to voluntary commitment and its potential implications; he discussed the varieties of parish models and the ways parish ministry was extending itself “beyond the confines of parish structures and into the larger community.” (p. 23)

These few recollections of Phil's thinking and acting bring us to the point of the directions parishes have taken through the years. Recall the description I gave of the "typical" 1963 parish. What of the parishes today?

Part 2

And what of the parishes today?

Perhaps most notably, personnel have changed, but also sizes have changed, ethnic/racial composition of parishioners has changed, and attitudes have changed.

The pastors range in age – quite literally from 26 to 86, though 30 to 70 is more usual, but priests can no longer look forward to retiring at the age of 65. (Story of 83-year-old could serve another 15 years.) Except for the largest parishes in the most "priest-rich dioceses," only rarely are associates assigned. Newly ordained spend less than five years as associates, some less time, before they become pastors. Gone are the days of "apprenticeship" and easing into priesthood. Two-thirds of the dioceses have fewer active priests than parishes.

Overall parishes average nearly 4,000 members, 1,250 more than 50 years ago. As the table shows, the largest parishes are now a third of all parishes, while the smallest dropped from 24% to 15%. Seven dioceses have lost 50 or more parishes in recent years, among them many small parishes.

At the same time, smaller parishes are frequently merged or clustered, i.e., two or more parishes are served by one priest. Well over half of the parishes are configured in this "multiple parish" arrangement (based on research in my book, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes*). About a third of all pastors are serving several parishes.

Other personnel is vastly different, too. The nearly 18,000 permanent deacons number almost enough for one per parish, though they are not distributed equally. The 40,000 paid lay ministers and countless volunteers assist in untold ways in helping parishes thrive, even as the number of priests and religious continue to slide rather rapidly downhill.

While the once nearly ubiquitous Catholic parish schools are closing in many parishes, those that remain open now employ over 150,000 lay teachers, largely replace the sisters. Parishes scramble to keep adequate enrollment – class sizes of 50 are no longer a concern. Raising funds to pay to keep these schools

open is a vexing problem for many parishes. Though thousands of sisters still work in parishes and parish schools, and many more are volunteers, their numbers are diminishing rapidly. The few new orders are staffing only a small number of schools.

Besides personnel, even more remarkable since Vatican II are changes in worship. How has parish liturgy changed in 50 years? In the May 27, 2013, issue of *America*, John Baldovin writes that the results of the Council “have been fairly mixed,” but he notes four significant areas of change: 1) the use of the vernacular, 2) the reorientation of the church building (priest no longer facing the stationary altar, 3) the expansion of ministerial participation, and 4) the restructuring of the liturgical year. (p.12)

The mixed results referenced by Fr. Baldovin are often labeled as the “reform of the reform.” For example, he says, “In English we seem to have moved from a rather loose and somewhat uninspiring translation to a text that is stilted and filled with awkward archaisms.” No doubt, Fr. Murnion, whose words were so elegant, would have found the present translation quite difficult.

Relative to the church building, “the reform mandated that the main altar of any church at which the Eucharist was celebrated needed to be free-standing so that the presiding priest could stand on the side facing the people.” As a result the liturgy became more communal and participative.

“The third area of reform is the noteworthy expansion of liturgical ministries”: deacons, readers, acolytes, servers, musicians, and extraordinary ministers of Communion. (p.13)

Finally, Fr. Baldovin notes the important rearrangement of the liturgical year: Sunday was restored to its pride of place; celebrating the paschal mystery, the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord took a central place. The integrity of the 50 days of Easter was renewed and fewer ranking saints days were celebrated. Lent took on a two-fold focus of Christian initiation (RCIA) and renewal of that initiation through penance. Also a much richer Lectionary was available with a three year cycle of readings, more of them from the Old Testament.

In each case, some of these major goals are now being challenged. The main task of understanding more deeply and more explicitly the connection

between life and church celebrations remain a crucial task, something Fr. Murnion worked so hard to teach pastors to implement in the parishes.

As we look to the future, we have the far-sighted insights, experience, and research of the past, promoted and forwarded by Fr. Murnion for forty years. We are also fortunate now to have a relatively new study (2008) of pastoral ministry and parishes led by Marti Jewell and David DeLambo and six national Catholic groups, the “Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project.”

In looking to the future, the study concluded that changes in pastoral leadership will be needed in order to deal with several key issues:

- parish clustering
- the changing nature of faith communities
- lay leadership
- multicultural diversity and
- young adult (participation) and leadership

The study emphasized the need to work together (partner in Phil’s words) to find the courage to create vibrant parishes.

What are (or will be) the hallmarks of these “Pastorally Excellent Parishes”? Their numbers abound, thriving because they are following the prescriptions for success recognized by Fr. Murnion and the multitude of priests and lay leaders he helped educate for years.

Characteristics

1. They have developed mission statements, with broad consultation, and then engaged in pastoral planning to reach the goals of the mission. They have an agenda.
2. They have engaged in planning after analyzing the needs of the parishioners, with extensive involvement of groups and individuals.
3. They have organized the many activities of the parish, led by the pastor and staff and competent lay ministers, informed pastoral councils and knowledgeable finance councils. Training in parishes for all these activities is required.

4. They communicate, interact, relate, dialogue across many parish entities – with representatives partnering with each other in parishes and reaching out into the broader local community – and universal church.

These characteristics can be summarized in three words, what we might call “Trends” – intentionality, complexity, and vitality – as identified in the “Emerging Models” study. Intentionality relates to having an “agenda” in Fr. Murnion’s words; it means drafting a mission statement and engaging in planning.

Complexity requires analyzing parish needs and organizing appropriate leadership groups and parish activities. And vitality means paying attention to the increasing diversity of parishes, gaining the involvement of the younger generations, and reaching out beyond parish boundaries.

To set the parish in the direction of assuring the success of these three trends, the Emerging Parishes report, noted several marks of pastoral excellence:

1. Preaching that connects Scripture to daily life
2. Attending to the needs of the sick, homebound, and bereaved
3. Having a pastor and staff energized and enthusiastic about ministry
4. Liturgies that are prayerful, reverent, and spiritually moving
5. Engaging in outreach to the poor

Specific tasks stemming from these changes require a new approach to ministry. This means that both pastors and lay ecclesial ministers must:

- acquire an understanding of the **effects** on parishes and parishioners of **changing personnel**
- engage more conscientiously in **social analysis** to uncover real and perceived pastoral needs
- be willing to accept the reality of **diversity** without destroying essential **unity**
- bring into compatible working relationship those with **ideological differences** and those with **varied preparation** who minister together, and
- equip both spiritually and intellectually all those who minister, so that they are prepared to **work collaboratively** for the salvation of all.

All of these ideas Phil had already advanced for many years. Their identification by the recent study gives an indication of how many pastors and other ecclesial ministers were formed in the ideals that Fr. Murnion championed. He has indeed changed the shape of parish ministry.