

Built from Living Stones: Hispanic Catholic Parishes Without Boundaries or Buildings

Kenneth Davis

Abstract

“Hispanic” is a term from the United States (USA) census bureau later adopted by the United States Catholic Council of Bishops (USCCB) that refers to USA residents who trace part of their ancestry to Spanish-speakers. Usually they also have ancestors from among either American indigenous communities or Africans imported as slaves, or both. For the purpose of this article, it presumes that whatever their level of acculturation to USA society, their preferred language of worship is still Spanish.

A new way of being Catholic is necessarily forged by those Hispanics. They are not assimilating into the USA church as did former immigrants from Europe, but they are also unable to simply reproduce the Catholicism of their twenty plus countries of origin.

New church structures must therefore address this novel phenomenon, especially in areas where those immigrants are recent or geographically dispersed.

Rather than only continuing the mostly futile attempt to integrate immigrants into existing parishes, local ordinaries should consider other options including parishes without boundaries or buildings. Such personal parishes constituted of a community of small communities are not only possible under current Church law and doctrine, but often best fulfills the intent of those same documents.

Keywords

Hispanic, parish, community, American, church

Introduction

The National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities (NAPRC <http://www.naprc.faithweb.com/>), the North American Forum for Small Christian Communities (NAFSCC <http://www.nafsc.org/>), and similar organizations in the United States

of America (USA) attempt to restructure parishes through Small Christian Communities (SCCs).¹ Although they have had some success (RENEW and SINE in particular among Spanish-speaking Catholics), it might be better to begin the other way around: Instead of restructuring existing parishes into Small Christian Communities, found new parishes that as part of their charter are constituted primarily of Small Christian Communities.

This article asserts that making SCCs the founding charter for a parish might be the best way to begin Hispanic ministry endeavors in the USA, particularly in areas of the country where Hispanics are a relatively new constituency or too geographically dispersed for traditional national parishes.

Along with the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), it presumes a pastoral approach of integration rather than assimilation. Integration means maintaining the Spanish language and Hispanic cultures while promoting their incorporation with the balance of the Church. This approach requires some adaptation on the part of the rest of the Church or at least her leaders.² Assimilation would result in the erosion of the Spanish language and Hispanic cultures.

A further presumption is that while culture and language are necessarily and intimately related, they are not coterminous. Just as the United Kingdom and the USA are two nations divided by a common language,³ so too Hispanics who speak English well are not therefore culturally assimilated. Nor does it necessarily follow that English is their preferred language of worship. Sadly recent violence in Australia and France remind us that outside the USA as well, even the children and grandchildren of immigrants who speak the language of the host country fluently are not always accepted or integrated members of that society.

After completing this introduction with a depiction of Hispanic Catholics in the United States, the thesis of the article is developed through a description of SCCs using Church documents, then notes how Canon Law would make such a charter parish possible, and finally explains the advantages of an Hispanic parish that begins as a "community of small communities" rather than perpetually attempting to change existing parish structures.

A new way of being Catholic is necessarily forged by Hispanics in the USA. How best to depict the anvil and hammer of this forge?

¹ For other similar organizations see John Paul Vandenakker, *Small Christian Communities and the Parish* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994).

² Kenneth G. Davis and Lydia Menocal, "Culled to Worship?" *Seminary Journal* 11 (1996), forthcoming.

³ Various attributed to Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw.

The hammer is the dire socioeconomic circumstances in Latin America that forces the poor to immigrate, too often without proper papers, and therefore prey to the legal system and those who manipulate it for profit. The anvil is a largely secular society in the USA where Hispanics find a Catholicism vastly different from their own.

Catholicism in Latin America has historically been the majority faith. Thus even without sufficient clergy, it remained vibrant because it permeated all of society. Popular Catholicism, that is, the domestic religion that constituted a people not only as Catholic but Hispanic, was distilled through devotions at home but spilled out into the plazas. It is shared, public, emotive, and ubiquitous.

However, the Catholicism Hispanics often encounter in the United States has always been a minority faith at times subjected to hostility and discrimination. It has sometimes been defensive, insular, and often privatized.⁴ More clergy can mean greater control of homemade religion, and greater infrastructure can result in bureaucracy.⁵ This church of European descent prided itself on being "American," and sometimes resisted others who wanted to be Catholic in America (albeit North America) without being Catholic in the USA as Europeans had managed. But since those other American Catholics (Hispanics) were usually poor, undocumented, with little formal education and few of their own clergy to champion them, the memory of their historic and continued contribution to the church in the US is still widely unappreciated.

The first Catholics to reach what is today the United States spoke Spanish, and after evangelizing Florida, created a more permanent presence in places that continue to bear names such as (*Nuestra Señora de*) Los Angeles and San Francisco (*de Asís*). Therefore, although today's Hispanic Catholics are still majority immigrant; others trace their USA ancestry to the *conquistadores*.

The ranking Hispanic bishop, José Gómez, of San Antonio, told a recent gathering that there are around 28 million Hispanic Catholics in the country served by some 3,000 Hispanic priests (only about 500 of whom were born in the USA). That means that the historic priest shortage in Latin America is also extended into the USA. The ratio of Hispanic Catholics to Hispanic priests is about 9,000 to one or more than four times the ratio of non-Hispanic Catholics to non-Hispanic priests. This is largely the result of different immigration experiences. Non-Hispanic Catholics are overwhelmingly descendents of Europeans who were accompanied by their clergy. Hispanics are vastly descendents of Spaniards and either American indigenous or

⁴ Joseph P Chinnici and Angelyn Dries, eds *Prayer and Practice in the American Catholic Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 200-209.

⁵ Ann Taves, *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p.111.

African slaves or both, who rarely had sufficient priests especially after Latin America exiled Spanish clergy upon their independence.

The website of the USCCB gives other data such as: 1) Hispanics have accounted for 71% the growth of the church in the USA since Vatican II. What appears by comparison to Europe to be a robust local church would be shockingly similar to Western Europe if this were not so. 2) While some 40% of Catholics in the USA are Hispanic, the younger the age cohort of Catholics measured, the greater the percentage of Hispanics. The median age of Hispanics is about ten years younger than that of non-Hispanics, and they have larger families. This means that Hispanics are in their child-bearing years and have relatively large families. Coupled with continued immigration, most experts predict that within a generation the church of the USA will be majority Hispanic.

That, of course, presumes that the Church does not continue to hemorrhage Hispanics, which it has been doing since Vatican II, especially among the young and the second/third generation according to The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA <http://cara.georgetown.edu/index.htm>). CARA further notes that of the 20% of all USA parishes which are over 40% Hispanic, 129 baptisms are performed annually compared to only 32 in others. Such parishes also report 4.5 baptisms for every funeral, resulting in growth rates much higher than parishes with fewer Hispanics.

By any measure, Hispanics are both the past and future of the church in the USA. And yet this enormous and historic resource is largely squandered. Hispanics account for only about 5% of the hierarchy, 16% of permanent deacons, and 17% of paid lay ecclesial ministers. They are almost absent in chanceries, minuscule among clergy, and invisible in parishes.

The last time the Church lost such huge numbers of historically Catholic faithful to Protestant churches, an ecumenical council was called, seminaries established, religious orders founded. The Church was willing to revisit any ecclesiastic structure that was no longer addressing contemporary needs.

By reconsidering the structure of today's parish in the USA, the Church will again have new options to address a similar situation. The bountiful presence of Hispanic Catholics is a demographic and spiritual blessing for the USA. But their presence in large numbers, insistence that they have something to teach as well as learn about American Catholicism and their abandonment of the Church is new. New social situations require novel ecclesial structures. Simply continuing to champion the so-called integration of Hispanics into existing territorial parishes is unnecessary and self-defeating. Moreover, the particular reconsideration of parish structures suggested in this article is quite consistent with both Church history and current Church documents.

Small Christian Communities in Church Documents

Lumen Gentium (26) states: “This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament.” Of course, Word and Eucharist are necessary components of these communities that “. . . though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Note that Hispanics in the United States are often poor, deemed small (or marginal) and often consider themselves a Diaspora.⁶

During the decade after Vatican II, Catholic leaders in Latin America (especially those living with the poor and in Diaspora) reflected on how they actually lived Church. With few priests and poor transportation infrastructure, many had always experienced Church as SCCs, although without that name. They often served poor, isolated communities of *aldeas* or *caseríos* (i.e. small), but that very fact made those same communities dependent on local resources and organization as well as extended family leadership (i.e., community). And they always considered themselves and had always been considered “united with their pastors” (i.e., Christian or ecclesial) even when Word and Eucharist as envisioned by those pastors were infrequent events precisely because of few clergy and poor transportation. SCCs simply gave a name to the way Catholics of the Southern Hemisphere (especially in rural areas) had almost always experienced Church—as *Lumen Gentium* recognized.

Some of those local leaders, however, wrote and taught at times as if there were a dichotomy between the people and their pastors.⁷ This dichotomy led certain others to introduce incompatible ideologies into various SCCs, or *comunidades eclesiales de base*, and sometimes they co-opted the leadership of those SCCs with partisan designs. Hence, although this was infrequent and while in general the bishops of Latin America have always been quite supportive of SCCs, Paul VI did voice some cautions in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (58). SCCs should:

- seek their nourishment in the Word of God
- avoid the ever present temptation of systematic protest and a hypercritical attitude, under the pretext of authenticity and a spirit of collaboration;
- remain firmly attached to the local Church in which they are inserted, and to the universal Church, thus avoiding the very real danger of becoming isolated

⁶ Thomas A. Tweed. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷ See critiques, for example, of Leonardo Boff, *Eclesiogenesis. Las Comunidades de Base Reinventan la Iglesia* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1986)

- maintain a sincere communion with the pastors whom the Lord gives to His Church, and with the magisterium
- never look on themselves as the sole beneficiaries or sole agents of evangelization
- constantly grow in missionary consciousness, fervor, commitment and zeal
- show themselves to be universal in all things and never sectarian.

Such recommendations have been adopted virtually universally, and supported by leaders around the world.⁸ One can summarize them in common and common sense principles: 1) membership in SCC is open to all, but leaders must be chosen trained, coordinated and supported by their pastors; 2) reflection materials should express Catholic teaching; 3) as cells in the Body of Christ, SCCs only flourish when a part of that Body.

Fortunately, in the United States there were no public or acrimonious battles between bishops and Hispanic theologians or pastoral leaders. On the contrary, the latter lobbied for more Hispanic bishops.⁹ This may be why documents from USA bishops concerning Hispanic ministry are consistently positive, even emphatic, about the importance of SCCs.

The National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry approved by what is now the USCCB in November, 1987 has as a general objective a model of Church that could serve as a constitution for SCCs, and would appear best promoted through them. It states that the Church should be: "...communitarian, evangelizing, and missionary, incarnate in the reality of the Hispanic people and open to the diversity of cultures..." (17). This ecclesiology of *comunio* lived by SCCs and faithfully echoing Vatican II, is "...the strongest and most coherent dimension..." of that Plan.¹⁰

The theme of "belonging" from #37-38 of the Plan is not only an antidote to the feeling of displacement through Diaspora, but also central to an ecclesiology of *comunio*, particularly as it is presented in other documents:

The small community has appeared on the scene as a ray of hope in dealing with dehumanizing situations...

⁸ Marcello de C. Azevedo, S.J., *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1987).

⁹ Richard E. Martínez *PADRES: The National Chicano Priest Movement*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005). pp 88-98

¹⁰ Michael Connors, CSC. *Incultured Pastoral Planning: The U.S. Hispanic Experience*. (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2001), p 94. Page 102 elaborates: "If the pastoral priorities for Hispanic ministry are collaboration, evangelization, and formation, as the NPPHM identified them, SECs (here called SCCs) would seem to be one reasonable, historically tested channel for efforts to those ends."

The role of the parish, in particular, is to facilitate, coordinate, and multiply [them]...
the parish should be a community of communities.¹¹

Proponents of SCCs note that our post-Christendom society is not unlike the world in which Christians lived before Constantine. If in fact we live in a world that is now less supportive of Christian families and faith commitments (“dehumanizing”), perhaps we might revisit an ecclesiology from our own pre-Constantine past, that is, the domestic church mentioned in St. Paul’s letters which sustained Christians before the period of territorial parishes and public basilicas.

Do not other small communities in many modern contexts address this dehumanizing longing for belonging with the success of movements such as the Charismatics, the energy pulsing through storefront Pentecostal churches, the power of countless self-help groups, and even the distorted desire for community found in too many youth gangs?

When the Body of Christ is dismembered by individualism, it is self-consumed by the culture of death; but a sense of belonging or the experience of community nurtures that Body with a culture of life. Hence, John Paul II speaks positively of SCCs in *Christifideles Laici*, but even more clearly in the 1990 *Redemptoris Missio*:

These communities ... take root in less privileged and rural areas, and become a leaven of Christian life, of care for the poor and neglected, and of commitment to the transformation of society. Within them, the individual Christian experiences community and therefore senses that he or she is playing an active role ... a source of new ministries... they also show how divisions, tribalism and racism can be overcome. (51)

Nine years later, and closer to home, the Holy Father in *Ecclesia in America* reiterated: “... consider the parish as a community of communities... form ecclesial communities and groups of a size that allows for true human relationships. This will make it possible to live communion more intensely...” (41).

Finally, the USA bishops again firmly affirmed SCCs in their 2002 update of the National Plan, *Encuentro and Mission*¹²:

Among Hispanics, small ecclesial communities have been and continue to be a valuable expression of the evangelization efforts of the Church. ‘These small ecclesial communities promote experiences of faith and conversion as well as concern for each person and an evangelization process of prayer, reflection, action, and celebration.’ They are

¹¹ The National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *The Hispanic Presence* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1984), paragraph p.

¹² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Encuentro and Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, November 13, 2002).

a prophetic challenge for the renewal of our Church and the humanization of our society ...we bishops affirm these small communities... as an effective response that brings families together within cultural and faith contexts that affirm and support family life, the language and culture of the community... (41-42)

Even this brief review of contemporary history is sufficient to demonstrate that SCCs are a sign of the times, part of that which has been believed always (since apostolic times) and everywhere (extant on every continent) by everyone (from pope to peasant).

Nonetheless, in the United States even among Hispanics they are still not yet commonplace. There are many reasons for that paucity, but chief among them is the fact that in the United States any experience of parish other than territorial ones with a resident priest and large buildings is so far outside of contemporary experience as to seem abnormal, even incomprehensible.

Although more and more parishes do not have a resident pastor and some are de facto national parishes (that is their territorial boundaries contain overwhelming numbers of one nationality), still considerable infrastructure and consequent overhead costs are so typical that while non-territorial parishes are recognized as possible, parishes without buildings seem impossible. But does a parish always require buildings?

In the Northern Hemisphere after the fourth century, church buildings became not only common but uncommonly beautiful. However, in the Southern Hemisphere even today especially in poor areas, specialized buildings dedicated solely to liturgy are considerably less common. This may be why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins its discussion of such buildings in #1179 by saying:

The worship “in Spirit and in truth” of the New Covenant is not tied exclusively to any one place. The whole earth is sacred and entrusted to the children of men. What matters above all is that, when the faithful assemble in the same place, they are the “living stones,” gathered to be “built into a spiritual house.” For the Body of the risen Christ is the spiritual temple from which the source of living water springs forth: incorporated into Christ by the Holy Spirit, “we are the temple of the living God.”

The *Catechism*'s next paragraph states that the reason for constructing “buildings for divine worship” is to “signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ.” And the section concludes in #1186 by saying that “The visible church is a symbol of the Father’s house... of all God’s children [which ought to be] open and welcoming.”

Thus the emphasis is placed on the living stones of the faithful, which should be served by the visible stones of the house of worship. Any other church building is an edifice to artifice.

Too often Hispanics find they are invisible to other Catholics who live in the same place but who are not united with them as (unlike the Hispanics) they are rarely willing to learn another language or culture. In order to find work, housing etc., Hispanics especially in areas where they are new or disparate must learn some English and something of the host culture. USA born citizens (and parishioners) on the other hand are notorious for not valuing a second language or for presuming that their culture is or ought to be universal. Hence, with the best of intentions by bishops or priests, the ideal of an integrated parish where people of distinct languages and cultures are equally welcome and represented remains only a dream.

Experience shows that the house of worship itself is often only open for Hispanics when convenient to those who own and operate it (non-Hispanics), and is seldom welcoming.¹³ In fact, often the worship space is rented to them by the parish through billing or deducting a portion of the collection from Spanish masses. For this reason it is not uncommon for parish staff to complain that the two communities share a worship space, but are actually parallel rather than united communities of worship.

If the building set aside for worship is not a church as envisioned by the Catechism, and if that is so mostly because the people who own and operate it are unwilling or unable to really welcome the presence, language, and cultures of others, perhaps such buildings should be left to those whom they serve (non-Hispanics) and worthy celebration space where Hispanics feel at home should be sought elsewhere.

This seems to be a possibility presented by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, which in paragraph 288 states:

For the celebration of the eucharist, the people of God normally assemble in a church or, if there is none, in some other fitting place worthy of so great a mystery. Churches and other places of worship should therefore be suited to celebrating the liturgy and to ensuring the active participation of the faithful. Further, the places and requisites for worship should be truly worthy and beautiful, signs and symbols of heavenly realities

Hispanics like all Catholics deserve worship space that is worthy and beautiful, but also welcoming. In mission outstations as well as in migrant camps, this is accomplished in humble circumstances and temporary accommodations. Several families, for instance, might be charged with caring for and bringing to Eucharist the iconography, ornaments, vessels, candles, and even fur-

¹³ Or Hispanics are relegated to the basement. See Ana María Díaz Stevens, *Oxcart Catholicism on Fifth Avenue: The Impact of the Puerto Rican Migration Upon the Archdiocese of New York* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

niture (altar, chair, ambo) needed to create an appropriate place for liturgy. Employers of casinos and hotels with many Hispanics who work on Sunday have lent wonderful space on a regular basis that can be quickly converted into a reverent worship place to accommodate an early Mass before the workers begin their day. Neither Church documents nor good pastoral care necessarily require temples, in fact, Church law is flexible precisely because pastoral experience has demonstrated that welcoming worship space within the means of a community is more Church than a lovely edifice masking artifice.

Integrated parishes of equality among racially, ethnically, and linguistically distinct groups is an idealistic ecclesiology stymied by the realities of anthropology. And the people who are hurt most when those groups inevitably compete for the same space is precisely those most defenseless. History shows that our efforts to integrate (not assimilate) Hispanics into existing parishes is at best slow and difficult. Therefore, it might be more effective to simply found new parishes without boundaries or buildings, that is, personal parishes that as part of their charter are constituted primarily of SCCs. And there is nothing in Canon Law to preclude such a possibility.

Canon Law and Parishes Founded as a Community of Small Christian Communities

A significant innovation of the 1983 Code is the treatment of parishes. The new code treats them as people more than places. Thus Canon 515 §1 defines a parish as:

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.

However, 516 §2 adds, "Where some communities cannot be established as parishes or quasi-parishes, the diocesan Bishop is to provide for their spiritual care in some other way."

Obviously Canon Law envisions a variety of possible parish structures. We see some examples in the military, others in the missions, still others in prisons or in countries where Church activities are restricted.¹⁴ All that is required is that the Bishop designate a group of the faithful within his jurisdiction as a parish, and entrust them to a pastor. From the examples above, we see that such a group of the faithful does not require either buildings or boundaries. And in fact, when speaking of personal parishes (Canon 518), the code

¹⁴ There are entire personal prelatures, i.e., *Opus Dei*.

specifically mentions possible reasons for non-territorial parishes, including “the rite, language or nationality of the faithful of a certain territory.”

A group of the faithful who share a common language or nationality, therefore, can lawfully be designated a personal parish without either geographic boundaries or physical buildings. They do need to be constituted by their bishop, and they need a pastor as well. Although the sacraments available only from priests are necessary, Canon 517 §2 also envisions other kinds of leadership:

If, because of a shortage of priests, the diocesan Bishop has judged that a deacon, or some other person who is not a priest, or a community of persons, should be entrusted with a share in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish

Hence although the same canon directs that the bishop must “appoint some priest who, with the powers and faculties of a parish priest, will direct the pastoral care,” the day-to-day leadership of this parish without boundaries or buildings could be entrusted to a variety of competent persons as is typical in SCCs.

Ministry in this church without borders must necessarily be different from more typical USA parishes, but while it would be made up of a community of small communities and could use homes or store fronts instead of churches and office buildings, it would still be ecclesial (united to the bishop) and provide all the services required by Canon Law such as 528, which stipulates that the ministry of the parish priest, and by extension then to others collaborating with him, shall include:

- * Proclamation of the Word of God
- * Preaching on Sundays and Holy Days
- * Catechetical Formation
- * Works of Social Justice
- * Care for Children and Young People
- * Evangelization and Outreach to the unchurched
- * Eucharist devoutly and frequently celebrated, with penance available
- * Other devotions including prayer in family that leads to their assuming an active role in the sacred liturgy
- * All of the above under the direction of the diocesan Bishop

The Word of God is always proclaimed during a SCC meeting. Although meeting weekly in homes, constituents of these small communities would also gather in a common space (e.g., a hotel) on Sundays and Holy Days for preaching and Eucharist.

Numerous catechetical programs already emphasize the role of the domestic church or other small group gatherings (e.g., the RCIA);

moreover a distinguishing feature of SCCS among Hispanics is the inclusion of children and young people.¹⁵

Likewise, Hispanics in particular have noted the importance of SCCs in preparation for preaching.¹⁶ Virtually all the literature on SCCs conclude that they frequently reach out to the unchurched, always include prayer, and increase people's desire to celebrate in Eucharistic since they feel in the SCC experientially what happens at Eucharist sacramentally, i.e., the Body of Christ.¹⁷

All of this, of course, would be conducted under the direction of the bishop and his priest delegate (sacramental minister) as stipulated in the founding charter, which would include other necessary details such as proper financial and sacramental record keeping.

Although one critique of SCCs in the United States is their spotty engagement in works of social justice, this need not be the case and appears to be less so among Hispanics.¹⁸ Hence there is no reason to think that a new parish without boundaries or buildings, that is, a personal parish that as part of their charter is constituted primarily of SCCs, founded by the local bishop, and provided with at least part-time priestly ministry, could not provide everything Church law requires of a parish.¹⁹ As noted above, this very structure is not atypical in other countries nor unknown (albeit exceptional) in the USA experience.

In fact, if we seriously consider *everything* required by Canon Law, it is obvious that much is *best served* by a parish without boundaries, especially if that parish serves a people who, due to their language or nationality, have a longing for belonging. Note that Canon. 529 §1 states that the conscientious pastor must visit families (presumably in their homes) in order to get to know them and share their cares. Moreover it specifically states, "He is to be especially diligent in seeking out the poor, the suffering, the lonely, those who are exiled from their homeland, and those burdened with special difficulties". And that same canon §2 says. "Moreover, he is to endeavour to ensure that the faithful are concerned for the community of the parish, that they feel themselves to be members both of the diocese and of the universal Church, and that they take part in and sustain works which promote this community."

¹⁵ Bernard J. Lee, SM. *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000) p. 50.

¹⁶ María Luisa Iglesias, "Participative Preaching: Laity as Co-Authors of the Homily," in Kenneth G. Davis and Jorge L. Presmanes, eds. *Preaching and Culture in Latino Congregations*. (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000), pp. 62-74.

¹⁷ Lee. pages 60 and 133.

¹⁸ Lawrence J. Howlett. *A Field Study of Hispanic Ecclesial Base Communities in Northern Illinois* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University: Ed. D. dissertation, 1998).

¹⁹ Some other requirements such as a finance committee would also be needed, but others such as maintenance of records might be handled by a territorial parish or the diocesan chancery.

The poor, the exiled, the lonely or especially burdened are the proper care of a pastor who should visit them in their homes so that they feel that they are members of the Church, and part of feeling at home in a church, is taking responsibility for it, i.e., sharing their own time, talent, and treasure.²⁰ All of this ministry to those longing for belonging is often best served (at least among Hispanics) by SCCs. Rather than burden this ministry with restructuring the territorial parish, deconstructing its ecclesiology, assuming its large overhead, and challenging the non-Hispanics who may be quite happy with the parish as it is, why not start everything with nothing?

Begin a new, personal parish chartered at its founding as primarily a community of SCCs with a designated (at least part time) priest as well as other trained leaders chosen by the bishop, properly trained, and continuously coordinated and supported just as envisioned in the *National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry*.

Obviously such an initiative is an option for the bishop as explained in Church law; indeed the fact that the 1983 Code makes it easier to erect personal parishes implies encouragement of them rather than otherwise.²¹ And parishes of small communities are likewise buoyed by conciliar, synodal, as well as papal documents and most especially by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. As noted above, while unusual, it is not unprecedented.

However, to convince the bishop (and those he might wish to consult, e.g., the priest senate), it might be helpful to show the advantages to Hispanic ministry of a personal parish without borders or buildings founded from the beginning as a community of small communities.

Advantages of an Hispanic Parish Founded as a “Community of Small Communities”

The 1952 Apostolic Constitution of Pius XII, *Exsul Familia Nazarethana* states:

²⁰ Hispanics support churches that support them. See William C. McCready, “Organized Religion and Nonprofit Activities Among Hispanic People in the United States”, in Herman E. Gallegos and Michael O’Neill, *Hispanics and the Nonprofit Sector* (New York, NY: The Foundation Center, 1991), pp. 83-96. Also Jesse Miranda, “Religion, Philanthropy, and the Hispanic People in North America”, *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising* 24 (Summer 1999), pp. 59-74. And Lilya Wagner, Rebecca Paredes, and Ricardo Rodriguez, eds, *Envisioning Growth-Achieving Greatness: The Story of the Hispanic Stewardship Development Partnership*, (Indianapolis, IN: The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, 2004).

²¹ Compare to the 1917 Code #216.4: “Parishes based on diversity of the language or nationality of the faithful found in the same city or territory cannot be constituted without special apostolic indult, nor can familial or personal parishes; as to those already constituted, nothing is to be modified without consulting the Apostolic See.”

Indeed, as we know, special parishes have been established for the various languages and nationality groups. . . Such parishes, most frequently requested by the emigrants themselves, were a source of great benefit both to dioceses and to souls. Everyone recognizes this and respects it with due esteem. Therefore, the Code of Canon Law duly provides for them (Can. 216, 4). And as the Holy See gradually gave its approval, numerous national parishes were established, especially in America.²²

Although never widely adopted in the USA, Pius XII not only correctly identified the strengths of the national parish, but provided for this more flexible adaptation which could still serve the ideal of a newly chartered parish community of small communities.

For generations, the national parish served immigrants as a haven amid hostility as well as a bridge to their new home country. As Pius understood, everyone recognized that European immigrants had to have a culturally and linguistically vigorous place of strength from which to negotiate with the rest of Church and society because without it they would feel threatened and collapse into a defensive ghetto. However, from a position of strength guaranteed by a parish that respected their language and culture, they were successful in becoming a vibrant part of the Church in the USA.

In fact, the national parishes may have been victims of their own tremendous success. Not only did they lead to the assimilation of their second and third generation members, but as those descendants of immigrants became more assimilated and better educated as a direct result of those national parishes, they moved away from their old neighborhoods and churches.

So there were unparalleled successes as well as two difficulties. The success consists in keeping those immigrants and their descendants as vital members of a diverse church as well as educated and productive citizens of the country. The difficulties, however, were precisely the eventual withering of their language and culture (assimilation) as well as the vacated church complexes that ultimately became fiscal liabilities for the local dioceses.

Therefore, after World War II most dioceses abandoned the national parish model both because it seemed immigrants were all well on their way to assimilation (an approved paradigm at the time) and because dioceses did not want more empty buildings multiplying in the wake of any new immigrants. Just when the Spanish-speaking immigration boomed, then, the Church in the USA generally abandoned the national parish.

²² Jay P. Dolan and Jaime R. Vidal, eds. *Puerto Rican and Cuban Catholics in the U.S., 1900-1965* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp 84-87. Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* had already made explicit the previous implicit claims of *Rerum Novarum* that the dignity of work needed to sustain a family included the right to migrate in search of such work.

But since the church in the USA of the early twentieth century still largely retained its assimilation ethic of “Americanizing” newcomers, Spanish-speaking immigrants were forced into foreign parishes with little regard for their own cultural heritage. This was complicated by the fact that since the USA began to legally regulate immigration for the first time in the 1920s, many new immigrants afterward encountered not only social prejudice but legal barriers as well. And the bishops largely assumed that territorial parishes consisting of assimilated descendents of white (now mostly bourgeoisie) Europeans would welcome poor, brown, unassimilated newcomers. It did not work.

Moreover, the post-World War II Hispanic immigrant experience is very different from earlier European newcomers in other important ways. First, they were not newcomers! Spanish speaking Catholics had founded the USA church.²³ Second, they usually were not accompanied by their own clergy. Third, with new technology (radio, television and now internet) they could and did maintain their language and culture in ways that earlier Europeans could not imagine. Fourth, since their roots were deeper in the USA and since there was no ocean between them and their home country, continued immigration and visits back home also helped to maintain their heritage. Finally, after World War II minorities of all kinds began to insist that they could be good Americans (and Catholics) without abandoning their language and culture. In fact, all the documents of the USCCB now specifically reject assimilation; most recently *Encuentro and Mission*: “The commitment of Hispanics to become active participants and to offer their unique contributions in the life of the Church and society—versus *being assimilated*—has been a key value and principle for Hispanics in ministry” (14). Unfortunately, practical ecclesiology did not support this anthropology, and the result has been territorial parishes that feel invaded and Hispanics who feel unwelcome.

Given this new and continued reality, how might we replicate the successes of the national parish model, while avoiding its difficulties of assimilating people so well that national parish buildings become liabilities? Personal parishes chartered as a “community of small communities” without borders or buildings is a contemporary, flexible, and helpful possibility that present the following advantages.

First, such parishes provide all the advantages of the old national parishes without their disadvantages. That is, they provide an ecclesial space within a society and Church where the culture and

²³ Bishops were installed in Puerto Rico in 1511, almost three hundred years before the establishment of the diocese of Baltimore. Catholic churches were founded in the mainland USA by Spanish-speakers in the 1560s.

language of Hispanic Catholics are valued. This will allow for integration (a community increasingly bilingual and bicultural, but open to new immigrants) while avoiding either assimilation (loss of language and culture) or a defensive reaction collapsing into a ghetto.

Second, since that ecclesial space does not depend initially upon buildings, it will not leave large liabilities to the diocese. As the community grows and becomes more established and prosperous, it might consider leasing or even purchasing buildings. But when done at a pace within the means of the community, this not only insures that they as owners and operators feel at home and are therefore willing to maintain it, such fiscal responsibility means that the diocese is not left with empty church buildings. All successful Hispanic apostolates live within their means, which results in ownership rather than dependency.²⁴

Third, unlike fixed locations and physical buildings, SCCs are extremely flexible and nimble. Hispanics are among the most mobile of communities. They may follow new job opportunities or cheaper housing or safer neighborhoods. But while the community may move its physical location, for reasons stated above it will retain its culture and language. By not depending upon a physical location, the parish can accompany them wherever they go. And with less overhead as well as bureaucracy, such a parish is can quickly adapt to a change such as a new influx of immigrants, new patterns of acculturation, or a breaking crisis in Church or society.

That very adaptability also means that SCCs can take on new specialties as needed. For example, organizers can target Hispanic youth according to age or level acculturation.²⁵ Groups could be formed of those whose spouses live in another country. However the pastoral needs change, SCCs can quickly adapt.

SCCs have a track record of success, but have also been so widely evaluated that we can learn from their failures as well. In addition to the invaluable critique of *Evangelii Nuntiani*, for instance, we can look to models of SCCs taking on ecclesial leadership (e.g., one community charged with catechism, another with liturgical ministries, etc.) or leadership in society following the example of community development.²⁶

²⁴ Kenneth G. Davis, "Cursillo de Cristiandad: Gift of the Hispanic Church," *Chicago Studies* 38 (Fall/Winter 1999), pp. 318-328.

²⁵ Kenneth G. Davis. *El Recacer de los Jóvenes/ The Renewal of Youth*. (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2002).

²⁶ For instance, Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2002).

Conclusion

A new way of being Catholic is necessarily being forged by USA Hispanics. They are not assimilating into the USA church as did former immigrants from Europe. However, it would be foolishly nostalgic to think they could or should simply reproduce the Catholicism of their twenty plus countries of origin. Those churches themselves are continuously changing, not least in response to massive and historic emigration.

In the USA, however, new church structures must address this novel phenomenon of Hispanic Catholicism. The literature lamenting the massive defection of Hispanic Catholics makes clear that we cannot simply continue the mostly futile attempt to integrate immigrants into existing parishes and somehow expect a different outcome: Persisting in the same behavior while expecting different results is one definition of insanity. Supporting exclusively extant ecclesial structures and somehow expecting different effects appears likewise nonsensical.

We need to experiment with the paradox of the orthodox, namely, that renewed church structures are always needed to communicate our ancient Faith in novel situations. USA Hispanics are a new way of being Catholic and innovations such as personal parishes without boundaries or buildings is a renewed structure that can maintain the faith their ancestors first brought to America. Such personal parishes constituted of a community of small communities are not only possible under current Church law and doctrine, but are familiar to many Hispanics from their countries of origin, and respond nimbly to the ever changing realities of a post-Christendom church.

These personal parishes must, of course, be chartered by the bishop and charged with a (at least part time) priest. Indeed, some research indicates that the higher the profile of the bishop and/or pastor (e.g., through videotaped rather than printed materials), the better.

Membership should be open to all named in the charter (e.g., by language or ethnicity), but leadership limited to those chosen, trained, evaluated, coordinated, and supported by the pastor. Materials used in that training as well as in the small Christian communities must be faithful to the Catholic tradition.

As presented above, such a parish can meet all the demands of the Code of Canon law and other Church documents, but also offer a flexible and adaptable pastoral methodology that helps to:

- 1) Unify a people often disoriented by social dislocation
- 2) Strengthen that organization through appropriate, applied ecclesiology
- 3) Motivate that group for personal and social change
- 4) Establish the home as the base of those church operations

- 5) Recover a sense of the domestic church and priesthood of all the faithful
- 6) Place responsibility and ownership of pastoral care on the people as subjects rather than objects of ministry

Saint Francis of Assisi had a profound effect on the spirituality of most Hispanic Catholics.²⁷ But he has also affected their ecclesiology. Like many Church reformers, when he first heard the call to “rebuild my church,” he thought in terms of brick and mortar. Later, however, he realized that the call was to retrieve older (mendicant) structures and adapt them to new pastoral realities. He helped move the Church from a primarily rural and virtually monastic model to a more adaptable approach that accompanied a people on the move.

Saint Francis grasped the paradox of the orthodox. His followers evangelized Latin America during a time of massive migration, conquest, slavery, and consequent social upheaval not by simply reproducing European church structures, but by adapting them to serve the Church in a New World.²⁸ In today’s New World Order, an innovative personal parish chartered without buildings or boundaries, created by the bishop and consisting of mainly small Christian communities, can also be a helpful retrieval of earlier church structures for a people similarly suffering from social dislocation and therefore longing for belonging. A more personalized (not privatized) parish that both respects and adapts structures is a Church built of living stones.

Kenneth G. Davis, O.F.M., Conv.
Saint Meinrad School of Theology
200 Hill Drive
St. Meinrad, IN 47577
KDavis@saintmeinrad.edu

²⁷ Kenneth G. Davis, “The Venerable Vulnerable”, *New Theology Review* February 1996.

²⁸ Jaime Lara, “Roman Catholics in Hispanic America,” in G. Wainwright and K.B. Westerfield, eds, *Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2005), pp. 633-650.