

Drinking from the well

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We live in a mobile society where faith is no longer "taken for granted" but is born from a personal encounter with Christ. It is necessary to rethink our ways of being Church. Rather than partitioned fences, we need lifegiving wells that quench thirst and are sources of relationships and life. The recent Synod spoke of a Church "firmly rooted yet pilgrim", a Church capable of accompanying, welcoming and generating community around the life source of the Gospel. It is a challenge to transform a parish into a sacramental sign and space for mission. German author and priest, Christian Hennecke, has written numerous publications on the journey of the Church today.

The golden images of the past have their roots in a Christian life that signified being part of a parish community from baptism to funerals, and they were linked to enduring local town and village relationships.

But this reality has long become a thing of the past. Wherever possible in our mobile world, people of all generations freely choose where to spend their lives and the relationships they nurture. And with that, everything changes including our Christian faith, which is no longer a natural integral part of social bonds and obligations. If in the past it was possible simply to believe and find oneself embarked on the journey – voluntarily or by social convention – in today's fluid and mobile society that is no longer conceivable. Faith, which was once part of the air we breathed and simply there as fact, must now be conceived and rediscovered in new ways. And this also changes our understanding of belonging to the Church, and the way in which the Church lives and is configured.

What really matters: rooting oneself in Christ

If I ask myself why I am a Christian today (and a priest), I can clearly trace this same transformation in my life. It was obvious to me to go to church on Sundays – something not taken for granted in Germany in the 1960's – and I gladly participated in parish activities. But even then, friendships were not enough for me nor were the regular celebrations. I was searching, not knowing exactly what it was I was searching for, until I found it: I found God. I did not find God at home or in the parish, but – unexpectedly – during a meeting of a movement of ecclesial renewal and through spiritual meetings of youth in our diocese. Thus, relationships were established with people whom I had not chosen, but rather with those with whom there were bonds of a deep relationship in faith, a faith that did not consist in dogmas and traditions, but in an experience of the presence of the Risen One that shone

forth. What attracted me was therefore not a parish or a community or a movement, but an inner experience of the heart.

A "Church event"

Part IV of the Final Document of the Synod, entitled "Firmly Rooted yet Pilgrims," deals precisely with these typical experiences of today, and my 95-yr old mother follows exactly the same dynamic as young people. It is not a pre-established belonging to specific social structures, but a rootedness in an interior experience that brings a new conformation of being Church. The Synod affirms this: "The proclamation of the Gospel awakens faith in the hearts of men and women and leads to the foundation of the Church in a particular place." (n. 110). The Church's "foundation" does not consist only in founding new communities, but in the occurrence of the "Church event", rooted in Christ's presence. The Church has its roots in this presence and thus evolves into new forms.

From partition fences to wells

A friend beautifully illustrated this change with an image: Although animal pastures in Europe are often fenced, in the great prairies of the United States they do not build fences, but rather they install wells. Then, driven by thirst, livestock gravitates to these wells. Thus, it is not a question of bringing Christian pilgrims together in conceptual 'fenced' parishes, but rather of helping people find the well for which they yearn, and where the Church will then flourish. The Final Document expresses it this way: "These social and cultural developments challenge the Church to reconsider the meaning of 'local' in its life and review its organizational structures so they can better serve its mission. It is essential to understand 'place' as the real, actual setting in which we come to experience our humanity, without denying that there is a geographical and cultural dimension to this as well. Here, where the web of relationships is established, the Church is called to express its sacramentality (cf. LG 1) and carry out its mission." (n. 114).

Experiences from the Carmelite Monastery

For some time now, I am honored to preside at the Eucharist in a Carmelite monastery in Hanover. In addition to the community of nuns, I encounter an *ad hoc* community of about one hundred people. Christians from the most varied cultures and ages, and from every continent, gather there each Sunday. No one is obliged to come, but everyone chooses this place because they find spiritual nourishment, "atmosphere" and relationships. Many are also linked to their parishes, but not all. They come because they find roots and communion there. And so, the Church *grows on this spot*. People who do not know each other gather around a point of inner gravity to experience the becoming and "happening" of Church.

A new role for parishes

Those looking for a life source generally do not resort to parishes. I realized this recently, while listening to a newly baptized adult's enchanted story of faith. For ten years he gradually approached the Christian faith, following his own inner yearning. What led him to become Catholic were the books he had read, YouTube videos by well-known Christian

influencers, and other digital sources. Then, at a certain point, he wondered with whom to talk about his desire to be baptized. Before, he had not been interested in the Church as an institution or the parish, and perhaps he is still not interested in it but he loves meaningful liturgies and the Eucharistic celebration. He is searching for places where he can grow in faith. It is not local structures that guide him, but an inner thirst for the Source.

The Final Document of the Synod also observes this: "The parish is one of the main organising units in the local Church present throughout our history...Changes in how we experience and live our relationship with locality require us to reconsider how parishes are configured." (n. 117).

In fact, the sacramentality of the Church through the Eucharistic celebration in the parish community can be a privileged place for experiencing Christ. It gathers and unites people. "Here, where the web of relationships is established, the Church is called to express its sacramentality (cf. LG 1) and to carry out its mission". (n. 114). Thus, it is the place where the root becomes visible, and a living community is born.

A different perspective

On one hand, the parish can be a meeting space where people come together and experience a communion that has as its source the power of Christ. On the other, it is clear that where the classic religious 'socialization' from one generation to the next no longer works, as is now the norm in my own socio-cultural context. New ways are needed and the Synod also rightly states: "Responding to the new needs of mission requires opening up to new forms of pastoral action that take into account the mobility of people and the space in which their life unfolds." (n. 117).

What happens, for example, if the Gospel mission is carried out by following, with children and parents of various cultures and religions, the periods of the liturgical year? Catholic schools could become - for people who otherwise have nothing to do with the Church - places of proclamation in which the desire for baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist are nourished and grow, and this obviously happens within the geographical context of a parish as well. Thus, it also offers the opportunity to encounter Christ in their "existential territory". Teaching religion, as well as charitable and other pastoral initiatives, can lead people today to the source, to the well. But in all these cases, is not necessarily linked to a specific fixed form. The parish is not the nucleus, fulcrum and goal of the Church's mission. Rather it becomes a question of whether people can find Christ there.

In Godehard's garden and elsewhere

In my episcopal city of Hildesheim (Germany), there is the rectory and a parish garden at the basilica. Few people regularly attend Sunday Mass there, but sacred music brings together an extraordinary choir. In central Hildesheim, there are hardly any musical ensembles anymore, at least at first glance. Yet the basilica's garden has recently become a neighborhood meeting place. Classes from nearby schools and families come with their children. Life blossoms and people begin to talk about their faith.

Then, two hundred meters away, the Vincentian Sisters, who are part of this parish, created a place where meals are distributed, and there is accompaniment assistance for the homeless and the poor. Through this, many discover the Christian faith in a new light.

Such initiatives are not rare, and I have become aware that it is not so much a question of developing new pastoral techniques for bringing people together, but rather one of strengthening people in their faith. In this way, their charisms and gifts can be set in motion along paths that lead to new sources of faith for themselves and others.

A new vision

But for this to occur, new ways of thinking are needed, and these cannot be taken for granted. We need to ask ourselves if schools, various initiatives, and new locales serve only to extend a parish's relational space according to an ecclesiocentric vision? Or is it instead a matter of opening and forging paths in all these places, where people can follow their deepest longings, and in this way the reality of the Church will eventually blossom?

For this to occur, two conditions are needed: First, there is a need for people who bear witness to their faith in daily life and secondly, there is need for accompaniment of people in their fragile search, so that they may grow and deepen through new faith experiences.

But I believe that new approaches or pastoral programs are still not enough. We also need to remember that this type of pastoral care is characterized by a "powerlessness" that is tied to grace. Faith cannot be "produced". Rather the Spirit works in the most diverse ways. And thus, it is important not to fall into the danger of a new kind of ecclesiocentrism or parochialism. There is need to live one's mission in the awareness that God is already at work in the lives of many people.

A Sunday Mass

Recently, I was a guest in a large parish, where I presided over Sunday Mass. The local environment was secular and characterized by societal challenges, and the town is among the poorest in Germany. To the parish leaders' surprise, the church was not only packed but packed with young people. "I don't know many of them," said the pastor. There was a wonderful atmosphere, and many participated in the choir and the moments for children and youth. It was a celebration.

Is this not precisely the role of parishes today, as the Synodal document discusses? There were faithful of all ages and – unexpectedly – people from all nations.

This calls for a new pastoral attitude. In a Eucharistic community there are no "guests" nor "strangers". Rather, unity in Christ constitutes a family, and hospitality becomes a decisive challenge. At the same time, there is need for openness to the breadth and diversity of ecclesial cultures.

People who rediscover their faith from its roots seek parish community first and foremost for support, accompaniment, and opportunities to grow in their faith. It is therefore logical that, even in this case, the question is: *how am I put in a position to live my own mission?*

A new type of Christian asks precisely this question and the Final Document rightly observes: "By placing a special emphasis on Christian initiation and offering

accompaniment and formation, the parish community will be able to support people in the different stages of life in fulfilling their mission in the world. In this way, it will become more evident that the parish is not centred on itself but oriented towards mission. The parish is then called to sustain the commitment of so many people who in so many ways live and bear witness to their faith in through their profession, in social, cultural and political activities. " (n. 117).

Being Church

Given all this, a "come to us" parish community structure not only gives way to a "going towards" structure, but it takes on a much more Christocentric profile as well. The Church is not an end in itself. Rather it is the sacramental place where Christians encounter Christ and draw strength for the mission - nothing more and nothing less. Enthusiasm for the mission depends on the attractiveness of a lifestyle lived in the midst of the world. And so, new existential "churches" are born in those places where people live and work. In their simplicity, these churches need nothing more than the presence of the Risen One, who unites people and illuminates professions, life activities, and skills from within.

In this way the Church becomes - and remains - an unpredictable adventure of the Spirit. In this way, what is absolutely necessary and rightly expected in parishes stands out: to be sources of living "wells" that are accessible to all.