

NOTES

WHAT IS A PARISHIONER?

In a recently published Catholic book the editors remark that a parish is not simply a "branch office" of the Church, nor a periodic audience of people, nor an occasional public; but it is a formally organized social group.¹ To stress their point the editors make use of Hiller's definition of a social group and apply it to the Catholic parish: "a distinctive and organized plan of relations by designated persons participating in the pursuit of some one or several implicit or explicit values."²

This statement raises three particular questions in the mind of the social researcher, and we shall attempt to discuss only the first of them in this paper. (a) Who are the designated persons, i.e., the members of the parish? (b) How are these persons subdivided or classified within the parish? (c) Is the Catholic parish in reality a social group? The answers to the second and third question depend largely upon the answer to the first.

One of the knottiest problems of research in the sociology of religion is contained in this definition of the local Church as a distinctive social organization. What is meant by "designated persons" and how are they designated? In other words, what criteria must be used in order to discover the actual members of the Catholic parish? Hiller takes up this point in explaining his formula for a social group. "The participants are designated and identifiable. The membership does not include just anybody but only those who are admitted by *some test of acceptability*, whether by birth or by initiation" (italics added).

This question is faced by all denominations which seek to employ an intelligent approach to their membership. The Jewish congregation usually counts as its members the heads of households who have identified themselves to the rabbi. The total "attending" congregation of the temple or synagogue would also include women, children, and other individuals who are not heads of households, but their number would be known only if the rabbi conducts a census. Some rabbis refine this whole category of people into regular and irregular worshippers.

The method of finding the "designated and identifiable" persons among the Protestant congregations is multiple, but in all cases it seems to imply a voluntary action on the part of the individual member. A letter of mem-

¹ *The Sociology of the Parish*, edited by C. J. Nuesse and Thomas Harte (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1951), p. 6.

² E. T. Hiller, *Social Relations and Structures* (New York: Harper, 1947), p. 286.

bership, or the public pronouncement of "the vows," is frequently the test of acceptability, especially when the person transfers from one place to another. Even where infant baptism is practiced, most Protestant churches do not count their membership until the individual signifies willingness to belong to the Church. This may be through confirmation, or through the act of "coming forward" at a church service, or by the simple declaration of membership.³

It is sometimes said that a person "joins" a Protestant church, but that he "becomes" a Catholic. If there is a difference between these two methods of attaining membership, it seems to lie in the deliberation of the individual himself. The Catholic attitude seems to be that the person is "acted upon" by the sacrament of baptism, for example: God Himself through baptism makes the infant a member of the Church, even though the deliberate consent is given through the godparents. Of course, an adult convert to Catholicism joins the Church by a deliberate action.

The problem of defining membership in the parochial unit may be approached in various ways. Theologically, every validly baptized person is, in a true sense, a Catholic,⁴ and by positive ecclesiastical law every lay Catholic (apart from the exceptions of national and personal parishes) is automatically constituted a parishioner, with a view to certain canonical effects, by the fact of residence within a parochial territory.⁵ This definition makes baptism the "test of acceptability" through which the person becomes a member of the Catholic Church, and place of residence the test of membership in the particular parish.

The sociological approach to the problem starts at this point. The sociologist's problem arises here because he is interested in real social relations and must find some concrete evidence of actual participation by lay persons, or of their willingness to participate, in the social unit called the parish. There is a need for criteria of membership which can give significance to the comparative data from various parishes.

The following criteria are suggested on the basis of empirical research in Southern urban areas. The first three may be called "institutional" in the sense that they stem from a regulatory pattern established by the Church

³ Cf. Murray Leiffer, *The Effective City Church* (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury, 1949), p. 155 f.

⁴ Canon 87: "Baptismate homo constituitur in ecclesia Christi persona cum omnibus christianorum iuribus et officiis, nisi, ad iura quod attinet, obstet obex, ecclesiasticae communionis vinculum impediens." In this discussion, however, we exclude those persons who are validly baptized in, and also belong to, a non-Catholic religious denomination.

⁵ Canon 94, n. 1: "Sive per domicilium sive per quasi-domicilium suum quisque parochum et Ordinarium sortitur."

itself. They are: baptism, place of residence, and racial origin. The last-named criterion is interchangeable with national origin in places where national parishes have been canonically established.⁶ The other three criteria may be called "personal" in the sense that they depend mainly upon the belief and the behavior of the individual Catholic. They are: intention, religious observance, and social participation.

Since the Catholic Church was established by Christ for the sanctification and salvation of all human beings, we may say that *every person* living within the territorial boundaries of a parish is either potentially or actually a member of the parish. In this broadest sense (after making the required racial distinction) the "care of souls" for which the parish priests are responsible extends to every soul in the parish. The "missionary" aspect of the parochial function is directed toward the potential parishioners, and in an ideal sense it may be said that both clerics and laics should be concerned about the incorporation of non-Catholics into the parish. But for practical purposes of social research and parochial administration these non-Catholics cannot be considered participants of the parish as a social unit.

There is another category of potential parishioners which must be excluded from the sociological definition of the parish. These are the lapsed Catholics, or "dormant parishioners," who through lack of Catholic belief or failure in Catholic behavior (or both) can no longer be called members of the parish. A conservative estimate, based on several detailed research projects, is that at least thirty percent of the infants baptized in a normal urban parish cease later to function as Catholics and parishioners.⁷ There is undoubtedly some meaning to the axiom, "once a Catholic always a Catholic," but it is not a sociological meaning.

The relegation of lapsed Catholics to the category of potential parishioners does not resolve our problem; it simply states the problem in another way. If you can specify and count the non-Catholics and the dormant Catholics in any parochial territory, you know that the remaining persons are actual parishioners. But precisely herein lies the difficulty. Both the ecclesiastics and the sociologists make it sound easy by declaring that there is a dividing line between potential and actual parishioners. The facts of real social life, however, show that the imaginary line between two categories of people is practically never sharp and clearcut.⁸

⁶ Cf., however, Fr. Harte's chapter on "Racial and National Parishes in the United States" in *The Sociology of the Parish*, where it is pointed out that native-born children of foreign parents have the right to dissociate themselves from the national parish at the age of twenty-one years (p. 160). As far as the present writer can discover, this "right" to leave his racial parish does not extend to the Negro at the age of twenty-one.

⁷ See my *Dynamics of a City Church* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), p. 38 f.

⁸ Sex categories are clearly defined; classification according to marital status is multiple

It is obvious that an element of arbitrariness must enter into the solution of this problem of "designating" the members of the parish. This is why we feel compelled to add the second set of "personal" criteria. After the conditions of baptism, residence, and race or national origin have been met, the decision concerning the difference between the member and the non-member of the parish must be made by some official in the group, by the people themselves, or by some external observer. An "ideal decision" would arise out of the consensus of all three parties.

If the Catholic parish were like a social fraternity or a labor union, the priest could easily decide who is a member and who is not a member because he could quickly discern whether or not the individual had fulfilled the requirements for membership. If the parish were like a school, where periodic tests of achievement are administered, the priest could easily decide who is to remain and who is to be expelled on the basis of these tests. But every large urban parochial territory has within its boundaries certain persons who seem to be "fringe" Catholics because their status of membership or non-membership cannot be clearly decided by the priest alone.

It would be most helpful to both the ecclesiastic and the sociologist if this "fuzziness" could be removed. Neither of them can talk intelligently about the structure and function of the Catholic parish unless there is relative agreement about the "universe" of persons under discussion. If the pastor says that forty percent of the marriages performed in his church during the last twenty years have been mixed marriages, we know that the universe (or 100 percent) consists of those marriages kept on record in the rectory. It includes revalidations, but it does not include civil marriages nor the marriages of his parishioners (usually males) in other Catholic churches. But if the priest says that "forty percent of the married couples now in my parish are in mixed marriages," we do not know what he means because we do not know how he defined a parishioner. What must the married person think or do, as a Catholic, in order to be considered a member of the parish and thus be included in the universe of married parishioners?

One of the first problems which faced us in our study of Southern Parish was this question of "designating" the parishioners. The practical working solution which we employed, and which can undoubtedly be improved, is indicated in *Dynamics of a City Church* (p. 13 f.), which reports one-fourth of this research project. From the City Directory we transferred onto 4x6 cards the names and addresses for every dwelling unit in the parochial territory. We checked these names against the Address Directory of the

but can be logically refined. But even a simple arrangement of age categories is ultimately reducible to a continuum if the precise moment of birth is taken into consideration.

telephone company and against the records of the power and light company and those of the retail credit association.

Dividing the parish territory into sections of approximately ten square blocks each, we sent twenty-seven canvassers from door to door. On the prepared card for each dwelling unit they took down the information concerning the number, sex, age, marital status, occupation, telephone subscription, home ownership, race, and religion.

In this territory of Southern Parish we found 10,946 persons who by the institutional criteria of baptism, place of residence, and racial origin should be called members of the Catholic parish. Meanwhile we had prepared detailed census schedules similar to those used by Frs. Coogan and Kelly in their Florida study.⁹ Fortified with credentials from the pastor and encouraged by his announcements from the pulpit, we visited every dwelling unit which had reported the presence of white Catholics. It was through this process and at this point that we recognized the need for further criteria of parochial membership.

A relatively small percentage of these people refused to answer the census schedule because they "couldn't be bothered," or they were "too busy," or they "didn't want the priests to know all their business." Through the help of neighbors, friends, and relatives, and through telephone calls to the individuals themselves, we were able to fill their census schedules. But a much larger percentage, involving 4,510 persons, refused the schedules because they "didn't go to church any more," or they were "supposed to be Catholics but didn't bother with it." Most of the adults among them did not even know the name of the parish church. But the notable fact here is that these people had in mind a fairly clear distinction between a Catholic and a parishioner. They identified themselves as Catholics but not as participants of the social unit known as the parish.

This obviously indicates that there exist criteria of parish membership in the minds of lay persons other than baptism, place of residence, and racial origin. Are these criteria the same as those which exist in the minds of the parish priest or of the sociological researcher? For practical purposes it seems that we must know the *intention* of the lay person. The lapsed Catholic not only does not "go to church any more" but he does not intend to be considered a parishioner. On the other hand, we found numerous lay persons whose intention it was to be considered parishioners, even though some of them had not made their Easter duties and some had not attended Sunday Mass once during the previous year.

⁹ Cf. Fr. Kelly's contribution to *The Sociology of the Parish*, p. 244 f.; also his doctoral dissertation, *Catholics and the Practice of the Faith* (Wash., D. C.: Catholic Univ., 1945), p. 208 f.

By adding the criterion of "personal intention" to the three accepted criteria of baptism, residence, and race, we were able to conclude that there were 6,435 members of Southern Parish. This number included 1,155 children below the age of seven years, whose intentions were interpreted through their parents (even though some of these children had not yet been baptized). It included at least 374 persons, most of them living on the periphery of the parish territory, who preferred to attend services at one of the three neighboring parishes. It included also an unknown number of adult individuals whose intentional attitude may have been dubiously interpreted by the member of the family who answered the census schedule.

It has become an accepted procedure among social analysts to make a general division of a given population into three classes: (a) church members, (b) non-church members with a preference for some denomination, and (c) non-church members without a preference. The first two classes are then redivided according to the numerous denominations in the community so that each denomination recognizes both actual members and "preferential non-members." In writing about his research in Madison, Wisconsin, Bultena says that "each church group may be thought of therefore as having a loose 'outer fringe' of potential members and interested persons which for the average church constitute about one-fifth of the total."¹⁰

This is saying in another way that the intention of the respondent toward his religious status has to be known. Does he consider himself (a) Catholic and a parishioner, (b) Catholic but a non-parishioner, i.e., a baptized person who is not a member but still has not joined another denomination, (c) or simply a non-Catholic? No one can answer this question better than the lay person himself. We have used the term "dormant parishioner" for the second classification, made up of people who could be called "non-church members with a preference for the Catholic Church." We excluded them, on their own testimony, from the social unit called the parish.

The problem of interpreting the intention or meaning of the respondent to a questionnaire is one that constantly plagues the social researcher. The great majority of Americans, if asked what social class they belong to, will say that they are of the middle class. This seems to be a reflection of our democratic value system. The person in the upper class does not want to be guilty of unseemly boasting; the person in the lower class knows that he is supposed to aspire, as an American, to the "average" middle class. To avoid this confusion, and to arrive at a relatively objective rating in social stratification, the Warner school has devised a series of measurable norms for stratifying people within a community.

¹⁰ Louis Bultena, "Church Membership and Church Attendance in Madison, Wisconsin," *American Sociological Review*, XIV (1949), 384-89.

Because a person says that he is in the middle class, we must not necessarily conclude that this is so. Is the same doubt present when a person makes a declaration of his religious status? The analogy seems to fall down because of this difference: everyone is necessarily at some point in the social stratification of his community, but not everyone is necessarily included within a religious category. In the case of the parish, the four criteria already mentioned bring the persons within the social unit of the parish. They may then be classified within the religious structure by the use of the two final "personal" criteria: religious observance and social participation.

When the number of "designated persons" has been ascertained through the use of these four criteria, the conscientious social researcher has yet to study the two remaining criteria: religious observance and social participation. These imply two important questions which must be involved in any definition of a *social group*, and which we attempted to answer through a day-by-day, year-long observation of all activities in Southern Parish. In reference to Hiller's definition quoted at the beginning of this paper, are these designated parishioners (a) actually *participating* with each other, and (b) are they *in pursuit* of some one or several implicit or explicit values?

The comprehensive and detailed data which we gathered in this laborious process take on special significance when we relate them to the universe of parishioners, and they raise the further question whether the normal urban parish is a social group in reality, or simply some sort of social category or unit. For example, by actual count we found that on the average Sunday there were 3,465 persons in attendance at Mass and 493 who received Holy Communion. We found that there were large numbers who never participated in either the formal organizations or the informal social relations of the parish. These statements represent only a fragment of the data which we collected, but they comply with C. J. Nuesse's suggestion that "studies of religious observance" and "studies of participation" are among the important "empirical problems for research."¹¹

Here we are faced with a difficult analytical problem. If we insist that functional participation and social relations are prerequisites in the definition of a social group, and if at the same time we insist that the Catholic parish is a social group, we must drastically reduce the number of parishioners already "designated" by the four previous criteria of baptism, residence, race, and intention. In other words, it seems that we must take one of two conclusions: (a) either the large urban parish is not a social group in the strict sense, or (b) the numbers of persons who fail to meet some minimum

¹¹ Cf. chapter VIII in *The Sociology of the Parish*.

requirement of religious observance and social participation must be considered non-parishioners.

On the basis of genuine research data so far obtained from American urban parishes, the present writer tentatively accepts the first conclusion. The social facts of parochial life indicate that the urban parishioners constitute a social unity which might be called a "statistical population," or a "social category."¹² It is not the purpose of the present paper to make this point, which requires much more evidence than can be allowed here.

The theologian is probably not interested in the refinements which are required by the sociologist for the study of social functions and structures. He may well be satisfied to set down the definition of a Catholic without counting the number of Catholics or the manner in which Catholics live up to the definition. In the relationship of Catholicism to life, however, it seems necessary to study not only the practical criteria of parish membership but also the classification of parishioners according to religious observance and social participation. Without these our analysis of the whole socio-cultural system of American Catholicism becomes confusing and relatively useless.

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¹² This does not mean that there are no genuine social groups with a religious function within the parish. Besides numerous formal and informal groupings, there seems to be always a nuclear group which is the sociological "heart of the parish."