**WHY WHERE YOU LIVE MATTERS TO A PARISH**

“**As a general rule a parish is to be territorial**.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In other words, **most parishes have firmly circumscribed boundaries**. These geographic boundaries are the outer-limits of a parish’s jurisdiction.

It can be misleading to speak of “jurisdiction” because the term might be misunderstood as unidirectional, as referring to only the limits of a parish’s or pastor’s authority and power. We will get to that aspect later. The point that needs made first, though, is that **a parish’s geographic boundaries** or jurisdiction also **places responsibilities on the Catholic lay faithful who live within those parish boundaries**.

**If a parish is territorial, a Catholic’s eligibility to become a member of that parish depends on his or her having a domicile[[2]](#footnote-2) or quasi-domicile[[3]](#footnote-3) within that parish’s geographic boundaries.** If a Catholic lives within the geographic boundaries of a territorial parish, that Catholic is (1) eligible to become a member of that parish, and (2) not eligible to become a member of some other parish without due cause.

“The formal intention to reside personally and permanently in a given place is determinative here. In effect, this means that **domicile puts the individual in relationship to the local church**, both to the parish and the diocese. **Accordingly, domicile signifies a communitarian context. That is, it represents the place wherein the individual Catholic is going to work out his or her salvation both historically and personally** according to the responsibilities associated with the individual’s state in life.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This treatment has opened with a legalistic focus. That was done intentionally even though people – and not rules in-and-of themselves – are at the heart of the matter. Nonetheless, it is necessary to base remarks on an objective ground in order to avoid charges of arbitrariness, subjectivity, personal opinion, or of being uncharitable or unwelcoming. Then, too, it should be appreciated that – in the main – the rules *are* the rules because they serve a good purpose. We turn there now.

**What does “where you live” have anything to do with what parish you belong to? The answer is simple: community life is lived locally, not distantly.** It’s the people in your neighborhood whom you see every day. You learn each other’s routines (e.g. when the neighbors to your right and left mow their grass); you come to know each other’s hobbies and interests, how they spend their leisure time, where or if they go on vacations; you share stories, and hopes, frustrations, sorrows, ambitions, and successes across the fence between yards, on the patio over a coffee; you might have dinner or a cookout with others in your community (be it a neighborhood, a sub-division, or a planned development). It’s the people in your local community whom you care about and help. Where you live is where you find life. Where you live molds your thinking and your values. Where you live plays a big role in what you think of yourself, of who you think you are, of how you define yourself, and of your self-esteem. Each *parish* is a community, too. Do you live in *that* community?

The subliminal message behind the real estate industry’s mantra, “location, location, location,” is unconsciously also, “community, community, community.” Keeping up with the Joneses wouldn’t matter to us if we didn’t actually live near, or want to live near, the Joneses. Everyone has a natural need – and therefore an inclination or tendency to – be a part of a community.

The idea that living in community furthers human flourishing to a greater extent or degree than does living apart from other human beings, is an ancient understanding, not a modern one. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), writing four (4) centuries before the birth of Christ, maintained that the human being is best suited for living in community (i.e. in a *polis*) and that a community was a natural phenomenon – not a man-made modality. This is what Aristotle meant when he wrote, “Man by nature is a political animal.”[[5]](#footnote-5) He didn’t mean that the human person is naturally given to partisan wrangling and an interest in government, but that the individual is given to desire the good life that comes only from the pleasure and richness of associating in a healthy and meaningful way with other people who share like values and beliefs.

From this standpoint, then, our latest, contemporary manner of living – even the manner in which we now quite superficially live in shared spaces (i.e. in sub-divisions, gated communities, condominiums, apartment buildings, suburbs, towns, and cities) – is wholly *unnatural*. Our rather extreme insistence on individual autonomy and the genuine fracturing of stabilities that are an unavoidable consequence of an insanely mobile population destroy what Western philosophy has long, long considered the “natural order.”

Today isolation has become the normal mode of human existence. (I dare not call it “living.”) “Ironically, we talk today of how small our world has become, with the shrinking effect of globalization, instant sharing of information, quick technology, workplaces that operate around the globe [and workplaces that don’t even require *places* anymore]. Yet these do not necessarily create a sense of belonging. They provide connection, diverse information, an infinite range of opinion. But all this does not create the connection from which we can become grounded and experience the sense of safety that arises from a place where we are emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically a member.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

“The cost of our detachment and disconnection is not only our isolation, our loneliness, but also the fact that there are too many people in our communities whose gifts remain on the margin. Filling the need for belonging is not just a personal struggle for connection, but also a community problem. Community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence. To belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place [i.e. of this parish].”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Being invested in the parish, taking ownership of what you owe of yourself to the parish, and being a creative, visionary force in the parish don’t have the priority for some that they did when people lived most or all of their lives in one place, before mobility made us into neo-nomads and ahistorical wanderers. Once we became more accustomed to wide-ranging movements than we were to our ties to personal pasts, our appreciation for rootedness, stability, and commitment all took real hits as we psychologically adjusted to changing social rules-of-engagement.

“A tree that is repeatedly uprooted and transplanted will be hard pressed to produce healthy fruit. So it is with people and their spiritual lives”[[8]](#footnote-8) – including the spiritual lives of people who choose to transplant themselves. Parish-hopping and parish-shopping are consumerist approaches that are accelerating a fragmentation “that is shattering Christianity in the contemporary world[[9]](#footnote-9) and is doing so largely because consumerist approaches end up contributing to the further fragmentation of already threatened religious personal psyches. Sociological accounts of changes in the institutional nature of religion indicate that “contemporary religion has been transformed into a narcissistic, therapeutic exercise by generations of rootless ‘seekers’ who lack allegiance to religious institutions or communities [including the parish]”[[10]](#footnote-10) To be, and remain, rooted in place – in *a* place, a parish, that is determined mainly (if not exclusively) by one’s geographic residence will go very far in healing the individual psyche and thereby act to renew the local Catholic parish.

“We cannot be *laissez-faire* about the ties that bind [and the ties that ought to bind] us to each other. With so many forces in contemporary culture pulling families and communities apart, we can’t assume that everything will work out if we just go with the flow”[[11]](#footnote-11) and join the migratory who live in one locale and worship in another or join the peripatetic who worship in this parish and that parish willy-nilly, committed to none.

Geography matters. I am not an educator by training and so cannot speak with any authority regarding the reasons “geography” is taught (or anyway used to be taught) in schools. If it is still taught to children today I imagine, though, that the study of “geography” has a much different focus than it did when I studied it in the Fourth Grade. For my part, I see the greatest benefit of “geography” to lie in its aiding us to understand where we are in the world, and where we belong, in the context of where all other people are where they all belong.

Give some thought to this anecdote. “Geography is one secret to the strength and resilience of Orthodox Jewish communities. Because their faith requires them to walk to synagogue on the Sabbath, they must live within walking distance. This is also convenient for their communal prayer life. ‘My day is built around the prayers,’ [said] Rabbi Mark Gottlieb. ‘Morning prayers: wake up, go to synagogue. Afternoon prayers: go down the street from where I work in midtown Manhattan. Evening prayers: back home in my New Jersey neighborhood. … ‘It’s not enough to say that you go to synagogue on Sabbath,’ said the Rabbi. ‘You often see Jews who are able to go to synagogue two or three times a day, in addition to the Sabbath, are also those most able to maintain a healthy distance from the most nefarious elements of modern culture. It’s a matter not just of theological commitment but of practices and of seeing yourself as part of a larger Jewish community in relationship with God. This is not just for rabbis and scholars but also for the average observant Jew’”[[12]](#footnote-12).

In general, then, belonging to the parish that geographically serves the neighborhood you live in will afford you a greater range of spiritual and social growth opportunities than will a parish affiliation at a distance from where you live. It’s not enough to only go to Mass; you have to see yourself as part of a Catholic family that gets together for all kinds of reasons and at every chance: picnics, concerts, talks, parties, etc. You have to accept that – in Christ – these genuinely are your brothers and sisters, your mothers and fathers. You cannot belong to a parish happily if you are estranged from other parishioners either in spirit or in space. “The church can’t just be the place you go on Sundays – it must become the center of your life”[[13]](#footnote-13); and in order for that to have any chance of happening, you have to live geographically close to your church.

Perhaps it is time to talk once again of “jurisdiction” in order to bring this essay to a close. I wrote at the outset that “a parish’s geographic boundaries or jurisdiction places responsibilities on the Catholic lay faithful who live within those parish boundaries.” And I set aside then any discussion of a pastor’s jurisdiction. It is to this that I turn to now.

Since, “As a general rule a parish is to be territorial, that is, one which includes all the Christian faithful of a certain territory,”[[14]](#footnote-14) then it stands to reason that a parish pastor’s authority is also “territorial,” and extends to all the Christian faithful of that territory. In other words, since most parishes have firmly circumscribed boundaries, then it stands to reason that a parish priest’s authority has firmly circumscribed boundaries and his authority does not extend beyond those boundaries into another pastor’s jurisdiction.

A pastor’s limited geographic authority has practical implications for his relationship with other pastors, and – derivatively – for what a pastor ought to be able to expect from parishioners. First, a pastor may not solicit or encourage parishioners living in another pastor’s jurisdiction to “jump ship” and register at his parish. Neither may a pastor solicit or encourage those Catholics not registered in the parish of their domicile[[15]](#footnote-15) to register at his parish. The reason in both cases has to do with one pastor respecting the geographical authority and pastoral responsibility of another pastor. It is inappropriate and illicit for a pastor to extend, or attempt to extend, his geographic reach beyond his own assigned boundaries. Second, those Catholics living within the geographical boundaries of a particular parish ought to (with few exceptions) register at and attend that particular parish (for all of the reasons addressed in this essay). The contemporary inclination of a significant number of Catholics to “parish shop” is dismaying.[[16]](#footnote-16) The thrust of this essay is concerned with fostering *Catholic community*, and parish shopping – by and large – deters and inhibits efforts to build locally-based parish community.

These realities suggest that certain parish procedures, certain parish protocols, are fitting. First, when a parishioner has a valid (or, it must be added, a “questionable” reason) for wanting to change parish affiliation, then the parishioner – as a matter of courtesy and record-keeping – owes it to the pastor to tell him of their intention. On his part, the pastor ought to provide a letter (1) introducing the departing parishioner to one’s next pastor, and (2) permitting that next pastor to register the parishioner even if one’s domicile remains as it had been. Second, and this is the other side of the first, if a parishioner who lives outside a parish’s geographical boundaries wants to register in that parish, it is right and just that the pastor require that person to let the last parish know that he or she is transferring to his parish. In that regard, one transferring parishes may legitimately be required to provide a letter from the last pastor, evidencing his knowledge of the change.

None of these named procedures or protocols are punitive. They are not designed to make it more difficult for Catholics to switch parishes. They are intended to foster courtesy between pastors and between parishioners and pastors. They also manifest a healthy transparency between pastors and promote a guiltless move by parishioner.

In conclusion, consider the nature of community generally, and by extension, the nature of the parish community. Community is built out of personal, loving relationships – initially between persons, then among groups of persons. The family is the first human community; and from its structure arises every other community: civil and religious. Now, one must not sentimentalize or romanticize the family; family life is not always easy, and maybe not even mostly easy. Husbands and wives squabble; parents and children squabble. Family members do not always see eye-to-eye, are not always “on the same page.” Yet, one spouse does not abandon the family over a slight. A child does not run away from home over tough love. Members of a healthy, functioning family stand fast and have “each other’s back,” especially when the “chips are down.” The parish family is not to be any different.

We have to relearn the lost art of real community.[[17]](#footnote-17) And real community begins spatially: location, location, location. As a spatial subject, then, community has a predominant geographic character. Since most parishes are territorial, with designated boundaries, then they are like other communities: geographic in character. If we do not commit ourselves to, and do not situate ourselves in, a geographic context, then where in a spatial world can we go? When many of his disciples left Jesus and “no longer walked with him”[[18]](#footnote-18), Jesus asked the Twelve Apostles, “‘Will you also go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go?’”[[19]](#footnote-19)

**A SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Allen, John S. *Home: How Habitat Made Us Human*, Basic Books, 2015.

Block, Peter. *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.:

San Francisco, 2008.

Dreher, Rod. *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*,

Sentinel (an Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC): New York, New York, 2017.

Esolen, Anthony. *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, Regnery Gateway, 2018.

Miller, Vincent J. *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*,

The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc.: New York, New York, 2004.

1. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 518. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Domicile is acquired by actually residing in a (parish) territory for five (5) years with the intention of remaining permanently unless called away (*Code of Canon* Law, can. 102 §1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A quasi-domicile is a temporary residence in a (parish) territory that has the same operative principle as a domicile, though designed for certain classes of people circumstantially less rooted – college students, for instance. For such individuals, actually residing in a (parish) territory with the intention of remaining there for at least three (3) months unless called away (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 102 §2) qualifies the Catholic to join the parish of that territory. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eds. Beal, Coriden, and Green, *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Aristotle, *Politics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Block, 2, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dreher, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dreher, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dreher, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dreher, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 518. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Or quasi-domicile, each as discussed out the outset of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I call the phenomenon of parish shopping among Catholics a *Protestantization* of Catholicism. It is a historically long-standing practice of Protestants to seek out and attend those churches in which they find ministers they especially prefer (usually for his style and/or content of his or her preaching). This is a natural outgrowth of the Protestant renunciation of Catholic sacramental life and, primarily, of the Mass as sacrifice. Once Protestant theology embraced the notion of *sola Scriptura*, the charisma, manner, and speaking-ability of the minister became the *sine qua non*, the end-all-be-all, for choosing where to attend services. As a matter of course, Protestants have come to commonly cross from one denomination to another (for example, from a Presbyterian ecclesial community to a Baptist ecclesial community) – not for any theological reason – rather merely to be with a minister who appeals to their sensibilities (namely, their emotions and feelings). In contrast, the Catholic Church has never advocated or fostered (what I call) a Cult of the Priest. Catholics have historically understood, that “the man” (i.e. his personality, his preaching style, etc.) is only important in a metaphysically and theologically incarnational way, that is, that the priest acts in the sacraments *in persona Christi* (i.e. in the person of Christ). What’s more, it is the Eucharist that is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium* 11) – not the homily. “Our [Catholic] way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking” (St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 4, 18); it is the Body and Blood of Christ – body, soul, and divinity – that is our reason for coming to Mass – the homily is not the reason we come nor is it a reason for leaving. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dreher, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John 6:66. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John 6:67-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)