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REFLECTIONS ABOUT LITHUANIAN PARISHES

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What's In a Name

In Catholic canon law, most parishes have been "territorial," i.e., embracing a geographical segment of a city or an entire town. In theory at least, all Catholics living within the designated boundaries have been expected to worship in their territorial church. This rigidity broke down in the past generation after the worship changes of the Second Vatican Council. A large minority have gravitated to a parish, near or far, more to their liking in liturgical taste and style.

In contrast, Lithuanian and other ethnic churches have been called "national" parishes, usually lacking in geographical borders, but open to those who choose to worship in a language other than English. An exception is the huge metropolis of Chicago, where the bishop did prescribe borders for its onetime twelve Lithuanian parishes.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to coin a term that is fully precise. Groups that separated from Rome became known as "national," the obvious example being the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC). Some fifteen Lithuanian congregations, mostly short-lived, also became independent of Rome and affiliated with the PNCC, forming a branch called the Lithuanian National Catholic Church (LNCC). These separatists even had a bishop of their own, Jonas Gritėnas.

Language-based Parishes

It is more accurate to use the term "foreign-language" parish. The reason is that these parishes were initially sanctioned, not on the basis of ethnicity but rather by language. In reality, they quickly developed into cohesive culturally-based communities with distinct identities within the fabric of Catholicism. That is what troubled and confused bishops when they appointed bilingual (Lithuanian and Polish speaking) immigrant pastors for mixed ethnic congregations. The hierarchy pondered the question: Why the fuss about not having a pastor who was "one's own"? Today, over a century later, most priests ministering in Spanish do not have Hispanic roots.

The early Episcopal practice, inherently logical, often failed to take into account the profound ethnic and cultural differences of those speaking the same tongue. For a while at least, bishops failed to distinguish between Lithuanians and Poles as distinct ethnic groups, as initially happened in Providence, Rhode Island. Today there is a newfound sensitivity. The Portuguese language is a striking contemporary illustration. Thousands of South Americans speak their native tongue, Brazilian (Portuguese), as do the mainland Portuguese, the Azorean Portuguese, and the Cape Verdeans. Even so, wherever possible bishops strive to provide separate ministry to each of these four groups, which are quite dissimilar in many ways and not always mutually cordial.

Poles and Lithuanians

About 1868, after the American Civil War, two significant factors shaped these immigrant beginnings. First, being bilingual to some extent at least, Lithuanians tended to join Polish parishes, just as earlier Poles had affiliated with German parishes. Second, Lithuanian ethnic awareness was still quite dormant. Poles and Lithuanians tended to mix freely. Edited by none other than Jonas Šliūpas, the second earliest Lithuanian newspaper, *Unija* [Unity] (1884-1885] meant union with Poles, expressing in its very name what provided to be temporary solidarity. This unrealistic goal soon came apart at the seams when patriots like Brother Augustinas Zaicas and Fr. Aleksandras Burba began to promote a vigorous rising ethnic

identity. One could hardly expect bishops with Irish roots to know what was going on in the internal life of burgeoning East European immigrant enclaves.

Lithuanian-Polish Friction

Once Lithuanian ethnic consciousness began to take root, sparked by the nationalist movement here and in the czarist-occupied homeland, a mixed foreign-language parish in the making became an interethnic battleground. When Poles held a majority, they generally gained the upper hand in mixed ethnic congregations, retaining property and funds. When Lithuanians were the stronger element, they usually managed to edge out the Poles. In Pennsylvania, the "win and loss" column was just about evenly divided. Nearly every Lithuanian parish was conceived and born in a lack of harmony. Physical violence, calls to police, court appearances, and civil litigation became less than rare. Add to this mixture internal bickering between pastor and parish committees and you have a "bloody" scenario, too often repeated. St. George's in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, was intramurally probably the stormiest parish of all with legal hassles that lasted for decades.

Interethnic Peace

With the passage of time, Lithuanians and Poles tended to mellow. Human decency and common faith lent themselves to a calmer atmosphere. Interethnic marriages broke down barriers. Even in the early decades, both ethnic groups attended each other's picnics, marched in parades dedicating each others new churches, prayed together at the highly popular annual Forty Hours devotions, and attended each other's funerals. Admittedly, history does show some few instances of fanatical enmity. Nevertheless, in my revisionist study of New England called "Tensions in Biethnic Parishes: Poles and Lithuanians in New England,"* I concluded that, though there were frequent minor and embarrassing squabbles, for the most part, there was no abiding animosity.

The Future

By now, the majority of Lithuanian (and Polish) parishes have lost their identity. They have merged with local territorial parishes. Some have been combined in pairs or even threes with other former ethnic congregations. Priestly vocations have dwindled drastically. Deaths have thinned the ranks of parishioners. Many have fled to greener pastures in more affluent neighborhoods. Still others have shed their ethnic identity, assimilated, and are comfortable in their new surroundings. Nostalgic Christmas and Easter trips to the parish of one's upbringing hardly sustain and justify a church. An ethnic parish that has evolved into a neighborhood parish can realistically retain a few customs and observances while serving the non-Lithuanian majority. Sts. Peter and Paul in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is an example. In smaller Pennsylvanian towns that suffered little flight to the city, congregations survive as community churches with a Lithuanian flavor. The limitations that afflict Roman Catholic parishes impinge similarly on the few surviving Lithuanian Protestant congregations in the Chicago area.

A third wave of Lithuanian immigrants since the 1990s provides a challenge to urban centers like Chicago, Brooklyn, and Boston, still holding out as ethnic enclaves. These newcomers, tainted by a Soviet upbringing, require a persuasive evangelization to instill both ethnic pride and, more importantly, a genuine Christian mentality. One can only speculate about what tomorrow will bring.