

Amalgamation

A good starting point is a dictionary definition of *amalgamation*: “to mix so as to make a unified whole”. The thoughts that follow are the fruits of having twice gone through the process of amalgamating parishes and, later, moving to a parish where an amalgamation had recently taken place.

There are three basic contributing factors in consideration being given to amalgamation: falling numbers of priests to adequately staff the existing number of parishes; declining parish populations and therefore numbers at Mass; and, often as a consequence, insufficient financial support for the number of churches currently in use. And, of course, if the number of churches in use is no longer sustainable prior to amalgamation, there is a very obvious need to close churches as part of that process. This is, of course, the one thing in particular that never goes down well with people, but an empty church before amalgamation is still an empty church afterwards and a priest on his own can only spread himself so far.

It would be an extremely enlightened, perhaps extraordinary, parish community who would see and accept without question the need for their parish to lose its independent identity. For most, quite the opposite will be the case and even the prospect is likely to generate opposition and criticism, ill-feeling and division. Trying to be pastorally sensitive to such reactions doesn't necessarily make them any easier to deal with, and if taken to the extreme they may even be inexcusable. While the basic feelings of bereavement and loss are understandable, they should at least be expressed with charity.

In order to try to soften the blow of losing its independent status, sometimes a parish will be twinned (rather than amalgamated) with a neighbour, but this is often just the first stage in a process that will eventually lead to amalgamation anyway. My experience has been that doing one and then the other doesn't make the process any easier for people - twinning causes just as much angst and upset as amalgamation because people experience the loss of parish identity either way. I am convinced that it is better, more just, and certainly more honest, to get the whole process over with in one go. If we know that's what's going to happen eventually anyway, then let's say so, explain what it involves, and so give people the opportunity to “own” the process. The alternative merely creates a situation of double loss and therefore double grief and it takes that much longer for real healing to begin and for the whole community to come fully together.

In a twinned situation, one parish will retain its priest as he serves both communities from that base. On the surface at least, twinning is often more acceptable to the people of both parishes because they haven't actually "lost" anything other than, perhaps, a slight adjustment to their Mass schedule. Both still have a priest albeit that he is living in one parish and not the other. However this does create an inequality between the two communities and resentment can develop as people realise that it isn't a situation of actual twinning because they are not identical twins. The perception will be that "they" have a priest and "we" don't. From the priest's point of view it is also more difficult than in an amalgamation because he is serving two canonically independent parishes and both communities have a right to equal provision of Masses, confessions, and so on. In the normal course of events the system may be difficult though workable, but at Christmas and Easter which community gets which celebrations given that one priest can't possibly provide a full schedule in both churches? At least in an amalgamated parish, such services can be legitimately divided if there is more than one church, though they are perhaps best celebrated in the central church of the parish.

For the priest, twinning is also an administrative nightmare because both sets of parish registers have to be maintained as well as two separate banking, accounting and filing systems. By contrast, amalgamation offers the opportunity for a more practical, and hopefully more efficient, system of administrative management as well as, and more importantly of course, the carrying out of his spiritual and pastoral ministry.

Another potential problem area can be the choice of the name for the new parish. During the one-year twinning of two of my parishes, St Andrew's and St Peter's, the combined name of Ss Andrew and Peter was used in an effort to console those who were angered by the loss of St Peter's as an independent parish – particularly as it had been the original parish from which St Andrew's had developed. However, when neighbouring St Anne's later also joined the parish we reverted to the single name of St Andrew rather than trying to work out a possible combination of all the names. In any case, in terms of logistics and geography, St Andrew's was the central church of the amalgamated parish and therefore the most appropriate choice of patronage. Going for a completely new name wouldn't have been the answer because it wouldn't have changed anything in the minds of those who may have been unhappy with the amalgamation. Retaining a link with "the past", as it were, at least provided a starting point for our efforts to unite the previously separate faith communities by building on a name that was already familiar and acceptable to the majority.

There is also the question of terminology and the need to reinforce the “corporate identity” of the new single parish. This effort is essential in helping people to understand and accept that they are now members of a new faith community rather than continuing to identify with the previously separate parishes. It seems to me that full amalgamation (and right from the start), rather than twinning, is the only way to achieve the identity of a single faith community, again returning to the dictionary definition that I started with: “to mix so as to make a unified whole”. Anything that detracts from that, even the inadvertent use of previous parish names in referring to those sections of the new parish, has to be very deliberately avoided. Just to refer once again to our situation, we had one single parish but with the three churches of the three former constituent communities. It took a very real effort to insist that people refer to the parish by name, St Andrew’s, and that the other names (St Peter’s and St Anne’s) be used to refer to the churches only.

It is often proposed that a process of consultation should precede any move to twin or amalgamate parishes, but there can be considerable confusion over exactly what this means. People generally understand the word “consultation” to mean that a proposal, still in its initial stages, is going to be presented and that their views and comments and criticisms will not only be invited, but will also be listened to and incorporated into the eventual decision. What they may not understand is that because of the pastoral circumstances driving the process - fewer priests, falling numbers at Mass and so on, circumstances beyond anyone’s control - a decision may well have already been taken because there really isn’t any alternative. I think people need to know that this is the case and that however disappointed they may feel, this is how things have to be in order to provide the best possible spiritual and pastoral care for the majority, given the constraints of the situation. Of necessity the process isn’t one of *consultation* so much as *information* and therefore perhaps a better word than “consultation” should be used in the first place so as to avoid any misunderstanding.

When it was proposed to fully amalgamate my initially twinned parishes, the “consultation” process involved a number of options being presented at a parish meeting. People could see that one of these was clearly preferred by the diocese and felt that, in reality, the decision had already been taken. It would have been far better to have explained the situation and the reasons behind the preferred option and to have hopefully persuaded people to recognise and accept the circumstances that made that the only practical alternative. Instead, because they felt they hadn’t actually been “consulted”, as they saw and understood the word, many

left the meeting feeling they had wasted their time and antagonistic toward a decision they felt had been imposed on them from above. We lost many hearts and minds that day and some we never regained because the experience served only to confirm their unfortunate cynicism toward diocesan policies and practices. I'm convinced that a lot of this could have been avoided, and the path ahead of us made that bit smoother, if the people had understood the process properly from the outset.

The Church is not a democracy and I think people should be clear on this. Such far-reaching pastoral decisions are not ones in which entire parish communities can be involved, but are necessarily delegated to specific diocesan bodies whose judgment and integrity have to be trusted, something which cannot therefore be jeopardised by any perceived lack of openness. But people will have a negative perception if they are invited to be part of a process of consultation (as they understand it) when that's really not what it is. Whilst a decision to amalgamate may have, in fact, already been made, there still needs to be a forum within which the diocese can explain the factors involved and why the decision had to be taken, answer people's questions, and hopefully also allay their fears.

The changing circumstances in which the Church in this country finds itself are becoming increasingly evident. If we choose to bury our heads in the sand like proverbial ostriches, we only have ourselves to blame if reality catches us unawares and unprepared. Parish priests should not shy away from making the people aware of pastoral trends within their dioceses and how these might impact on parishes in terms of future pastoral provision. But this should not be done in a "forewarned is forearmed" way, but rather in a way which makes it possible for people to prepare realistically for changes that may have to be made for sound pastoral reasons. There is still the danger that, while people may accept the inevitability of change, the "not in my backyard" syndrome will make its presence felt, but fighting such decisions, writing letters, signing petitions, going to the media, even demonstrating against them, is pointless in that people's objections won't remove the contributing factors that made the decision necessary. People being more aware, or better informed, in the first place might help to make the changes that have to be made a less bitter pill to swallow. Meeting the spiritual and pastoral needs of the people of our dioceses cannot be about "me, myself and I", but "we and us", having an eye and a concern for the bigger picture, a corporate concern for all the members of the body of Christ.

* * *

Fr Neil McNicholas