

CHAPTER SIX

*Clustering Parishes:
Reflections on the Practice and Theology**Eugene Duffy**1. Introduction*

In recent years most Irish dioceses have begun to think about how best to plan and manage their pastoral activities as the country experiences a profound change in its social and religious landscape. The issues that confront the church in Ireland are by no means unique and have already been faced in many other parts of the Western world over several decades.¹ Here it is proposed to look at the issue in practical pastoral terms and then to provide a theological rationale that underpins the process. A working definition with commentary will be offered as a starting point. Then various models will be explored, some of which will be more immediately applicable in the Irish context than others. A rationale for clustering will be examined and some concrete suggestions offered as to what pastoral activities might benefit from this arrangement. Finally, but very importantly, a theological underpinning will be proposed, which it is hoped will show that this contemporary challenge for renewal and development is entirely consistent with a sound conciliar theology, especially the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

It may well be argued that the clustering of parishes is simply delaying the application of more radical solutions to the current challenges in the Irish ecclesial landscape. There are other issues such as the removal of the demand of mandatory celibacy for the diocesan clergy, the ordination of women and much better structures of leadership at parish and diocesan levels which merit serious attention. However, in the immediate future these are not likely to be addressed at the magisterial level, the only level that can legitimate such change. In the meantime, it is necessary and appropriate to work with what is both possible and legitimate, but this should not preclude the other options being

1. See, for example, H. Witte, 'Clustering Parishes: Insights from the Dutch Experience' in this volume; also, K. Schuth, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006).

discussed and debated at all levels in the church. The Spirit has been given to all with a view to discerning what is true and best for the community.

2. *A Definition of Clustering*

It may be helpful to begin with a definition of a cluster and then explore some of its implications for current practice. Later, models for clustering will be considered. A cluster is a group of parishes committed to the long term relationship of collaboration to plan and provide for the spiritual, sacramental and pastoral needs of their respective communities. It involves the sharing of personnel, resources, programmes and facilities so that the needs of the constituent parishes or communities can be addressed without straining the resources of individual parishes. It contributes to the strengthening rather than diminishment of the life and ministry of each individual parish or community.

The size of a cluster can vary greatly from diocese to diocese as the number participating parishes or communities will be determined by a variety of factors. These will include: the availability of ordained priests; the population of the communities being clustered and their financial viability; the proximity of the parishes and their accessibility to one another; the size of the church buildings, the availability of office space, meeting rooms and other facilities; the location of schools; cultural factors, such as language or sporting affiliations. If a cluster is too small, it may lack the dynamism and stimulus to challenge the participants to be creative and courageous in facing the pastoral challenges that confront them. On the other hand, if the cluster is too large, it often lacks any sense of coherence, belonging or responsibility that is necessary if participants are to have a sense of identity and its ministers a unity of purpose.

In the Irish context, it is very common for parishes, especially in rural areas, to have at least two venues or more for Sunday liturgy. The communities that gather in each of these local churches or chapels often have a deep sense of identity and belonging that has been built up over generations. These half-parishes, as they are sometimes called, are in fact profound expressions of church and community, which in other parts of the world might be termed 'basic Christian communities'. Often they have their own resident priest and a pastoral council, operating as parishes in everything but name. Therefore, in the context

of the clustering of parishes, these 'half-parishes' need to be considered in a way that is respectful of their history and supportive of the sense of community they have acquired, sometimes over nearly two centuries. This does not suggest, however, that they should not be challenged to look beyond their own boundaries to work with and support neighbouring faith communities.

A cluster, like any individual parish, is concerned that the spiritual, sacramental and pastoral needs of its members will be properly addressed. A parish is not primarily a territorial entity nor is it simply a canonical structure. It is a living community of people, more akin to a family than an administrative unit. The focus in a cluster must be on how the needs of the people that comprise it can be met, not on how priests can be more effectively deployed. Irish parishes over the past 150 years have become accustomed to having a resident priest and have implicitly accepted such a presence as part of what it is to be parish. Now the focus needs to be on the local community and the question asked: how can we as a local or diocesan church support local communities of Christians in living out their vocations as authentic disciples of Christ in today's circumstances? Any community needs a lot of help and encouragement to do that, including catechesis, sacramental preparation and various programmes of spiritual renewal. They need pastoral care, for example, home visitation, care for the sick and housebound, chaplaincy support for schools, hospitals, nursing homes and industrial campuses, outreach to marginalised groups such as travellers, immigrants, homeless people or those with handicaps. None of these areas of pastoral activity requires an ordained minister. Until relatively recently in Ireland, many of these pastoral responsibilities were undertaken by religious women and men, as well as by the clergy. Since these are areas of responsibility that any baptised person can assume there is a challenge to local communities to see how they can begin to respond to these areas of pastoral need and put the personnel and resources in place to do so. The changed religious landscape now allows all of the baptised to give expression to their basic vocation as it was presented in the various decrees of the Second Vatican Council. The decline that has occurred in priesthood and religious life has opened up a new space so that each baptised person can share a greater responsibility for the overall mission and well-being of the church. This can only be seen as a positive development in the life of the

church and may well be a corrective action on the part of the Spirit. None of this means that there is not an important role for the unique witness of religious men and women and the service of ordained ministers.

The singular witness, generosity and exclusive dedication of vowed religious people will always act as a leaven within the church, encouraging all its members to renew their commitments to live their own unique vocations to the full. The ordained ministry is an essential element of the church's life, providing an authoritative proclamation of the Word of God and a gathering of its hearers to celebrate it in the sacraments. This essential ministry must be made as generously available as possible to each Christian community so that it can be nourished by the Word and with the Body and Blood of Christ.

3. *Models of Clustering*

Currently there is no agreed structure for a cluster with the result that the organisation and activities of these new groupings vary considerably from diocese to diocese. Here six models will be outlined, thus highlighting the possibilities that are available for those exploring the potential of clustering arrangements.²

- i) *Separate Parishes Co-ordinated by Parish Priests and Councils*: In this arrangement each parish retains its own parish priest, curate (if it has one or more), other ministers, parish pastoral council and finance council. The co-operative activities of the cluster are facilitated by a co-ordinating council or cluster pastoral council. Liturgical services, programmes and resources are shared among the participating parishes and these are co-ordinated through the collaboration of the clergy and the members of the co-ordinating council. A channel of communication and feedback is maintained also with the parish pastoral councils of each of the parishes.

In this model Mass times can be co-ordinated across the participating parishes to ensure that an adequate service is maintained if a priest has to be absent from his parish. Other liturgies such as penance services, ecumenical services, special commemorative services and other such events can be organised and celebrated at one venue in the cluster area.

2. The diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin provides in part the template for these models. See its website: <http://www.gbdioc.org/pdf/pastServMultiParishClusterModel.pdf>

Adult faith formation, liturgical formation, youth and family ministries and other programmes can be similarly organised by the co-ordinating council. This makes for a better use of personnel and resources, especially where local communities are not populous and cannot be expected to provide a wide range of facilities on their own.

- ii) *Separate Parishes with a Priest Moderator and other Priests:* In this model one priest in the cluster acts as moderator and each of the parishes or communities retains its own resident priest but none of them holds the canonical office of Parish Priest. In practice it may operate in a fashion similar to the previous model but the moderator has a role of *primus inter pares* and is the person responsible in law for the ministry of the grouping of parishes. However, it is expected that he work for a consensus in all decisions affecting the pastoral well-being of the parishes. A weakness of the model is that sometimes the priests involved in it may sense a loosening of the bonds which they normally have with their parish of residence. This is a model which holds a certain appeal for large urban communities where there is still a sufficient availability of priests to have a presence in individual parishes.
- iii) *Separate Parishes and One Pastor:* In this model one priest provides leadership, liturgical services and pastoral care for all the communities in the cluster. Meanwhile each individual parish retains its own internal leadership structure through its parish pastoral council, finance council and other personnel who are actively involved in the leadership and pastoral care of the faith community.
- This model may appeal to some small adjoining rural parishes. In many instances it is possible for a priest to preside at a Sunday liturgy in two or three communities without being unnecessarily overburdened. Equally, small communities can easily be supported by a non-resident pastor in calling forth and facilitating the variety of ministerial and leadership gifts already present in the communities. As is the case for all parishes in a clustering arrangement, their association with other parishes will help to compensate for any of the deficiencies in their own.
- iv) *Separate Parishes with one Priest Parish and Several Pastoral Leaders:* In this model there is one priest available to the clus-

ter and each of the participating communities is assigned its own pastoral leader, who may be employed full-time. This person could be a deacon, a member of a religious community of men or women or any baptised person. Thus each parish or community may be under lay leadership, retaining its own parish pastoral council, finance council and other lay ministers. However, the priest appointed by the bishop has a duty of oversight, as provided for in Can 517§2.

In this model the priest's sacramental role is obviously increased and his pastoral activity is seriously curtailed. His role as servant leader can come more into focus but the other ministries of leadership and pastoral action are also given much greater scope and greater visibility in the respective communities. The co-ordinating council for the cluster, too, will inevitably play a greater role than in the first model and so will the pastoral councils in the individual communities.

- v) *Merged Parishes with one Parish Priest:* In this model all the pastoral councils, parish committees, finances, sacramental records, etc, are merged together to create a new canonical parish. Everything is now centralised in the one place, except the places of worship. This is a very radical step, but one which may be necessitated in some instances where parish populations, material resources and the availability of ordained ministers dictate the move. In fact, many parishioners fear that this is the inevitable direction in which the clustering agenda is moving.
- vi) *Close existing parishes and Build a New Parish:* This model is a step further than the previous model and obviously more radical. It means that the existing parish buildings, churches, halls and residences are closed and sold to finance the building and equipping of a new parish complex. This will only be necessary in relatively rare situations, especially in an Irish context, given the attachment there is to traditional parish churches and properties. The new parish will then have one parish priest, pastoral and finance councils, an appropriate team of lay ministers and other resources to meet the pastoral needs of the newly created parish community.

These models are indicative of the range of options available for those involved in the task of clustering parishes. Whatever

option is chosen, it has to be recognised that the move from the familiar arrangements in a parish to one where greater sharing of personnel and resources is called for will always be difficult for all concerned. Therefore, it is a transition that calls for great sensitivity on the part of those planning for the future pastoral resources of a diocese or pastoral area. It calls for prayerful discernment, open dialogue, attentiveness to various local circumstances, histories and sensibilities so that all the genuine concerns can be heard and addressed as sensitively as possible. Otherwise, the end product may be a series of grieving and divided communities who are unable to witness to the communion of life to which the disciples of Jesus are called.

4. Rationale for Clustering

The issue of clustering has come to the fore in recent times as the numbers of ordained ministers and religious decline dramatically in the Western world. Not only are they declining numerically, but their age profile is increasing significantly as well. The result is that greater demands are being made on a group of people whose energy is in decline and who cannot possibly respond adequately to all the demands being made upon them. If the demands being made upon them continue to increase then they will not be able to endure the strain; exhaustion will precipitate an even bigger crisis. Therefore, if the present trend is allowed to develop the church will experience ever greater problems, the quality of parish ministry will be weakened and pastoral resources will not be in any way adequate to meet the demands that are made upon them.

The situation in Ireland at present is not as drastic as in many other parts of the world. It still has one of the best ratios of priests per head of Catholic population anywhere in the world. However, this actually strengthens the case for addressing the inevitable problems now because failing to do so may well allow future circumstances to dictate responses that may be less helpful. It is better to plan well for the future than to have to react in panic when the crisis moves beyond manageable proportions. Sometimes the fear of falling into some kind of semi-Pelagianism seems to deter church leaders from facing the realities that confront them and in their own bewilderment they convince themselves that the Holy Spirit will take care of the situation even while they remain inert. Such a theological vision or spiritual

outlook is not that of the church which has always been willing to plan for the building up of God's kingdom, while totally cognisant of the fact that it is ultimately God's achievement.

While current demographics of those in ministry may be forcing change, the new situation can also be seen as a blessing in disguise. It presents a radically new opportunity for a renewal and regeneration of the church in Ireland. Among the priests themselves, it creates a new sense of a diocesan presbyterium, challenging them to work in a more fraternal and collaborative fashion, rediscovering rich sources of personal, spiritual and professional enrichment. It spells the end of the era of clerical individualism when a parish priest might view his parish as kind of personal fiefdom over which he alone presided. Not only is the pastor challenged to work more collaboratively with his neighbouring priests, he is also challenged to seek out more actively those capable of ministry in his own parish, to recognise their gifts and call them into the service of the community.

In a situation where priests and other members of a pastoral leadership group begin to work together new energies are released and a potential emerges that could never be possible when a priest or even a single parish pastoral council works alone. Now new ideas can surface. Broader perspectives on the pastoral needs and more creative responses become possible. Given that a number of parishes are working collaboratively, there is a bigger pool of talent on which to draw. All of this provides a fresh opportunity to engage with the mission of the church in a more enthusiastic and spirited fashion.

The clustering of parishes facilitates a better stewardship of the resources in a pastoral area. Many of the services that an individual parish may have struggled to provide can now be done collectively. A group of parishes working together may, for example, be well positioned to engage a youth minister or a director of music or liturgy, whose services would be paid for by the participating group of parishes. Similarly, programmes in adult faith formation, training for ministries, liturgical formation and other educational services could be provided more effectively and efficiently if groups of parishes work in a spirit of partnership. Not only will it cost less, but those who participate in such activities will have a wider cohort of peers with whom they can confer and from whom they will draw support in living out of their own particular ecclesial vocations.

Administrative burdens can be shared and many of the routine expenses involved in the running of a parish could be much more efficiently handled if parishes worked in closer co-operation. Most rural parishes in Ireland were structured to accommodate people when transport to and from places of worship was by foot and the era of telecommunications had not yet dawned. Sufficient attention has not been paid to these factors in contemporary planning and redistribution of resources. In this context, too, it may be worth considering the living arrangements of the priests serving parish clusters. There are many social, pastoral and financial advantages to having central accommodation units from which priests travel out to their communities. Such an arrangement would address the isolation that many of them feel living independently of any real peer support. It would also mean that older priests would not be isolated from their familiar surroundings as they moved into retirement.

The sharing of personnel and resources that clustering involves requires a certain humility on the part of the communities and individuals concerned. All have to recognise that very few parishes have all the skills and talents that are required to meet their pastoral needs, but every parish has a range of gifted people. So, if these needs are to be adequately met there has to be generosity in sharing resources with other communities, and perhaps even more challengingly, there is the need for receptivity to the gifts that can be offered by another community. It is often easier to be a generous giver than a humble recipient. One of the great advantages for the church in Ireland at the moment is the very significant number of people who have taken courses in theology and specialised areas of pastoral ministry and who are willing to put their skills at the disposal of their communities. Indeed it is sometimes overlooked now that there are more people today taking courses in theology in the country than when the seminaries were fully of students preparing for the priesthood. Not only is there a great reserve of talented people with the knowledge, skill and competence to serve local communities but, they also have the right and responsibility to exercise their proper roles in the life of the church.

The goal of any clustering arrangement must be to ensure that each local Christian community is as well resourced as possible to live out its mission to the full. The focus has to be on the needs of the communities in the first instance not on the needs of

the clergy or their distribution. Provision must be made for the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Sunday Eucharist. Then, all other pastoral needs have to be considered and the personnel put in place to respond to them. If the cluster is working well, there is no reason to fear that this will not happen as the pooled resources in terms of imagination and creativity, personnel and finances will be much greater than has heretofore been exploited. Thus the clustering of parishes offers an exciting opportunity for a genuine movement of renewal in the church at this moment. However, this is not something that can be easily legislated. It will require leadership and encouragement simultaneously at the diocesan and local levels. It will require genuine discernment and openness of heart on the part of all those who are affected by the process.

5. Theological Foundations

Any worthwhile pastoral initiative must have a solid theological foundation and this is true for the process of parish clustering. It will be considered here under five headings: an appropriate image of God; an ecclesiology of communion; an inclusive theology of the priesthood; a spirituality of collaboration; a renewed vision of parish.

i) Images of God

Most people of an older generation were formed on an image of God that suggested a remote monarch who was omniscient and omnipotent, who presided in judgement over the affairs of the world and its people. It somehow conveyed the idea that God was dispassionate, totally rational and uncontaminated by the emotion that seemed to mar human interactions. Recent decades have seen a much more biblical approach to imaging God and this has led to a greater appreciation of the Triune God. Leonardo Boff remarked once that 'Sticking only with faith in one sole God, without thinking of the Blessed Trinity as the union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is dangerous for society, for political life and for the church ... It can lead to totalitarianism, authoritarianism, paternalism and machismo.'³ This evaluation has been sadly borne out by some researchers who have noticed among those guilty of sexual abuse that they have been

3. *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2000), 7

conditioned by images of God that were authoritarian and domineering. It is a salutary reminder that our images of God do influence our ways of relating and interacting with others. It is particularly significant in the context of a call to work more collaboratively with other individuals and groups in clustering arrangements.

Inevitably any language about God is inadequate and analogical. However, the New Testament gives us the least inadequate language to describe God when it says: God is love. Love is a dynamic between persons in a relationship. It suggests mutuality, reciprocity, vulnerability, goodness, truth and integrity. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to capture something of these characteristics as they pertain to God. The doctrine of the Trinity is a systematic and intellectual attempt to give a coherent statement of how God is best understood in the light of the human experience of God's interaction with the world and its people. Above all else, it is a working out of how God has related to the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Word among us. Reflection on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus leads one to see that he is the Son of the Father, that he embodies in his works and words the compassion of God for humankind and that his mission is kept alive and active through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is, then, a dynamism of love at the heart of the ministry of Jesus: he reveals the extent of the Divine love, that is prepared to empty itself in compassion for humankind, willing to embrace even death in the desire to manifest that love as concretely as possible. This divine love is revealed in the full integrity of a human life, without any trappings of what might pass as a show of divine power. Rather, the divine love is given a fully human expression and in turn shows what the human person is capable of when fully responsive to God's initiative. The Spirit that animated Jesus in his life is then given to his disciples after his resurrection so that the divine love can continue to be experienced and expressed by them until his return in glory.

In recent decades this image of the Triune God has been popularised by the use of the Rublev icon of hospitality. It depicts three angels seated around a table, with an open space facing the viewer. Their pose suggests equality, gentleness, joy and hospitality towards those who may eventually occupy that open space before them. It is as if they are sharing a banquet around

the table and are awaiting more guests to join them. One could imagine the Son being sent out with the invitation to come to the banquet. Such a thought is suggested by the meals which Jesus so regularly shared or spoke about in his ministry, an image of the Messianic times already familiar to the Jewish people. He communicates something of the reality of what this banquet is like in his public life and when he returns to his place in glory, this invitation is kept alive by the action of the Spirit. However, the banquet will only be complete when the persons of the Trinity are joined by the whole human family, whose presence they so obviously desire. Such an image of God is true to the bible and at the same time consistent with the great Christian doctrine about God. It is, even in this pictorial representation, so much richer and inviting than those familiar images of God as a lonely old man seated on a cloud above the world, with the finger of one hand raised in admonition and the tablets of stone inscribed with the commandments in the other hand.

The image of the Triune God acts as a model for all those involved in ministry. It is particularly apt for those being called to work in greater collaboration with other ministers and other communities. It is a reminder of the life of communion to which all are called, mirroring in the process the very communion of life that is at the heart of the Trinity. It challenges all systems of dominance, individualism and isolationism. So, if the older image of God was reflected in the rather monarchical approach to church structures, a consideration of the Trinity demands a much more relational and participative approach to ministry and governance. The church, even in its most local manifestation, is called to mirror the life and love of the Triune God. The rich relational dynamics demanded by parish clustering is well placed to effect this witness.

ii) An Ecclesiology of Communion

Just as the image of God has been revised in recent decades, so too has the image of the church. Since Vatican II the church is presented more as a communion of communities than as a universal, monolithic, static institution. It is the outcome of the activity of the Triune God: the creation of the Father, the embodiment of the Son's own mission, animated and empowered by the life-giving Spirit. The images used to describe the inner life of the church also reinforce this understanding. They are taken from the life of

the shepherd or the cultivation of the land, from the art of building or from family life and marriage,⁴ suggesting growth, development, imagination, creativity and a network of close interpersonal relationships. Vatican II, then, speaks of a communion of life which is grounded in the heart of the Trinity and which finds genuine expression in the concrete life of the Christian community. The church is to be the sign and instrument through which the Spirit effects the union of all people with God and of all people with one another.

This communion of life at the heart of the church is experienced in very concrete ways at the most local level. Whenever a community assembles to celebrate the Eucharist it is already sharing in the Banquet of Life prepared by the Triune God. It is an assembly of people who are continually striving to grow in communion of life among themselves, through their common worship and their efforts to support and encourage one another in various social and material ways beyond the eucharistic gathering. Not only is there a communion of life expressed by those present at the celebration, but the gathered community is reminded of the fact that they are also in communion with all those other communities that comprise their diocese under the leadership of the bishop and even beyond this to include all those communities who are united under the leadership of the pope. The ordained ministry in the church is a visible agent of ecclesial communion, ensuring that each local celebration of the Eucharist is a bonding of those present with one another under the presidency of their presbyter who is in communion with his bishop, who in turn guarantees unity with the pope and the other members of the episcopal college, in other words with the universal church. This is a sacramental foundation for collaborative relationships in the church.

The very nature of the church then demands that people work collaboratively, in a genuine spirit of partnership that reflects the dynamic of love and mutuality that characterises the Triune God. No minister can serve his or her community as if he or she were an isolated individual. The minister, lay or ordained, is always in relationship with others. This is as true for the pope as it is for the pastoral assistant in the most remote parish. In fact, when Vatican II spoke about the collegiality of bishops it was simply giving concrete expression to this ecclesi-

4. *Lumen gentium*, 6.

ology of communion. The same quality of collegial relationships belongs to all who minister in the church. Just as the bishops are called to co-operate with one another under the leadership of the pope, so are the priests of a diocese called to co-operate with one another under the leadership of their bishop. Similarly, all those who serve in the ministry of the church are called to work collegially with one another and under the guidance of their pastors. Again, this is played out in a very concrete way in a cluster of parishes. The collaborative nature of the ministry required by this arrangement means that priests and all who are engaged in ministry must work in greater collaboration with one another in their own communities and with all those who minister within the related communities.

An ecclesiology of communion can remain an abstraction unless it is practised at the most local level of ecclesial life. It is not something that applies only to the ministry of the church; it applies to communities as well. Each community is in relationship with all other Christian communities, in a sacramental way through the Eucharist, but this needs to be expressed in a very concrete way if the eucharistic reality is to bear full fruit. Communities are called to share their resources with one another, to support one another so that all are built up to be more credibly the sign and reality of Christ's presence in the world. This is precisely what happens in a cluster situation.

This development then presents a graced opportunity for renewal in the church in Ireland as the familiar ministerial profile undergoes remarkable change. There is now a real opportunity beginning to emerge for more of the faithful to assume a greater sense of responsibility for the life and well-being of the Christian community. There are sufficient numbers of well-educated and dedicated people to exercise roles of pastoral care and leadership in local communities. Current socio-political realities, too, have created the expectation that people should have a greater say in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. An ecclesiology of communion is well suited to respond to this contemporary mind-set and it provides a very sound theological underpinning for the ministerial activity within clusters.

iii) An Inclusive Theology of the Priesthood

If previous generations laboured with an image of God as one who was aloof and isolated, this was mirrored in the popular

perception of the ordained priest. Vatican II helped to retrieve a richer understanding of the ordained ministry by situating it in relationship to the entire community of disciples and also by accenting again the collegial nature of the diocesan priesthood. Brief reflections on each of these themes are in order as they bear on our discussion of clustering parishes.

A number of key decisions at the council determined a new and richer approach to membership of the church. First of all, baptism was presented as the foundational sacrament in the life of the church. It brings one into communion with the Triune God; it brings one into relationship with all the other members of the church; it gives one a mission to be an ambassador of Christ to the world. This community of people who are called together by baptism are a priestly people. It is this priestly people who together offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God by the witness and conduct of their lives and who bring this sacrificial offering to the altar to be offered in the Eucharistic celebration. This foundational liturgical principle was amplified in a second important decision in the area of ecclesiology, namely, to treat of the whole people of God before speaking of the hierarchical structure of the church. In this perspective the ordained ministry in the church is at the service of the entire community, ensuring that it is structured and equipped to fulfil its mission as the community of disciples, witnessing to and effecting the presence of the risen Christ in the world. Therefore, any planning in the church must focus on the needs of the community in the first instance, not on the needs of the ordained ministers. This should be a guiding principle for any decisions about the clustering of parishes, namely, how can each community be best enabled to be the priestly people of God?

The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, situates the ordained ministry in the context of the whole people of God, all of whom are called to offer their lives in a sacrifice of praise to God. The ordained minister enables this offering to be made, in the first instance, through the preaching of the Word. This dimension of the priestly service is given prominence, because it is foundational to the celebration of all the sacraments. It evokes and supports the faith of the Christian community so that it can more deliberately offer a worthy sacrifice to God. 'Priests should carefully study liturgical knowledge and art, to the end that through their service of the liturgy the

Christian communities entrusted to them may ever give more perfect praise to God, the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵ The focus is on enabling communities to grow in faith, to be more conscious of their vocation to know, love and serve God in their daily lives and especially in common worship, above all in the celebration of the Eucharist. The goal is to ensure that all God's people are equipped to realise their true vocation and that each local community becomes a genuinely priestly community.

This conciliar perspective, then, situates the ordained priest within the local community as a servant leader. He is no longer the isolated figure whose main function is the celebration of the Eucharist, in which others participate passively. Rather, he is now understood as the one who ensures that the gathered community is one that can fulfil its mission to the greatest possible extent both in the Eucharist and in the witness it offers to Christ in every circumstance of life, individual and corporate. It does not diminish the sacramental role of the ordained minister but connects his ministry more explicitly to the everyday lives of people. In the words of *Presbyterorum ordinis*, priests are to 'discern with a sense of faith the manifold gifts, both exalted and ordinary, that the laity have, acknowledge them gladly and foster them with care ... Furthermore, priests are set in the midst of the laity to lead them all to a loving unity.'⁶ In other words they are the leaders of the Christian community, facilitating its unity, which finds the high point of its expression in the eucharistic gathering.

Another characteristic of the ordained ministry that is developed in the conciliar documents is the collegial nature of the ministry. This flows naturally from an ecclesiology of communion that underpins so much of the conciliar thinking. The communion of life at the heart of the church is manifest in the eucharistic celebration, as already outlined. In an explicit way this sacrament witnesses to the bonds of communion that exist among the ministers of the church, as well as among all the baptised. The eucharistic prayers of the Roman Rite name this explicitly in the intercessions: 'Strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim church on earth, your servant pope N., our bishop N., and all the bishops, with the clergy and entire people your Son has gained for

5. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 5 (all translations from Norman Tanner, ed, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol II, London: Sheed & Ward, 1990).

6. *Ibid*, 9.

you".⁷ The ordained ministry in the church is a visible agent of communion, as was already highlighted.

Collegiality was a notable feature of the early church and it became so again in the ecclesiology of Vatican II. While it was expounded primarily in respect of the episcopate, it also has implications for the way in which all authority and leadership are exercised in the church.⁸ It is a term, then, which can be applied analogously to the presbyterium and its bishop in a diocese. The very first document issued by the Second Vatican Council makes this quite clear. It states:

They should all be convinced that the church is displayed with special clarity when the holy people of God, all of them, are actively and fully sharing in the same liturgical celebrations – especially when it is the same Eucharist – sharing one prayer at one altar, at which the bishop is presiding, surrounded by his presbyterate and his ministers.⁹

Lumen gentium also points in the same direction when it says that: 'The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their own particular churches, formed in the likeness of the universal church; in and from these particular churches there exists the one and unique Catholic Church.'¹⁰ The implication is that the local church is not a mere sub-division or branch of the universal church but is that church in its local manifestation, a situation where one might expect to find the basic characteristics of the universal church mirrored with a local expression.¹¹ Certainly, since Vatican II, one of the characteristics of the church which we have come to expect is that of collegiality. At an early stage in his pontificate, Pope John Paul II spoke of collegiality as 'the adequate development of organisms, some of which will be entirely new, others updated, to ensure a better union of minds, intentions and initiatives in

7. Eucharistic Prayer III.

8. Although the noun 'collegiality' is not used in the documents of Vatican II, episcopal governance is described as 'collegial' (fifteen times) and the hierarchy is described as a '*collegium*' (thirty-seven times). See Michael Fahy in Richard McBrien, ed, *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) s.v. 'collegiality'.

9. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #41,

10. LG #23.

11. See Joseph A. Komonchak, 'The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic', *The Jurist* 52 (1992), 416-447.

the work of building up the Body of Christ, which is the church.¹² Recent literature speaks of 'effective' and 'affective' collegiality. The former refers to the supreme power in strictly collegiate acts by the whole college of bishops in union with the pope. This is the dimension of collegiality with which the council primarily concerned itself. Affective collegiality is a less juridical term and refers to the spirit of mutual concern, charity and co-operation that exists among the bishops as a body. It describes the kind of relationships that are meant to exist among those who share responsibility for the mission and ministry of the church. This affective collegiality is rooted in the gifts of the Spirit and necessarily precedes any codification in law or well-defined structures.

The Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen gentium*, speaks clearly of the collegial nature of the priestly ministry of the priests of a diocese united with the bishop. It says:

As prudent co-operators of the episcopal order and its instrument and help, priests are called to the service of the People of God and constitute along with their bishop, one presbyterium though destined to different duties ... Under the authority of the bishop, priests sanctify and govern the portion of the Lord's flock entrusted to them, in their own locality they make visible the universal church and they provide powerful help towards the building up the whole body of Christ (cf Eph. 4:12).¹³

Among themselves 'priests are bound together in a close fraternity, which should be seen spontaneously and freely in mutual help both spiritual and material, both pastoral and personal, in reunions and in the fellowship of life, work and charity'.¹⁴ Priests are also called 'to unite their efforts and combine their resources under the leadership of their bishops'. *Christus Dominus* states, 'Moreover, all diocesan priests should be united among themselves and fired with enthusiasm for the spiritual welfare of the whole diocese.'¹⁵

12. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, I (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1978), 15, quoted in Charles M. Murphy, 'Collegiality: An Essay in Better Understanding', *Theological Studies* 46 (1983), 41.

13. *LG*, 28.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *CD*, 28.

So, whether one takes a purely theological starting point or a more practical approach to the ordained ministry, the conciliar teaching is very clear that it is a genuinely fraternal and collegial ministry. Yet, it is a teaching that has not been as fully received as one might have hoped, but its appropriation is crucial to the success of the clustering project. While the perspective of the magisterial documents is that of the diocese, most priests in their parishes think much more locally. The practice of fraternity and collegiality will begin in their immediate pastoral area or cluster. It is in this concrete situation that they will most easily and conveniently begin to co-operate with one another, sharing the burdens of the ministry with one another and assisting one another in very concrete ways. Such a collegial spirit will mean that each priest will be open to offering the benefit of his own resources, personal and material, to neighbouring presbyters and their communities and he will be equally open to accepting what those other neighbouring communities have to offer him and the community(ies) where he ministers. It is within this theological framework, then, that the practical considerations that were discussed earlier can be properly anchored. Once again, parishes that are clustered require a collegial style of ministry from all those involved and the theological rationale for this has already been well developed in the conciliar documents. Therefore the success of all clustering initiatives will be enormously dependent on an ecclesiology of communion and a collegial understanding of ministry.

iv) A Spirituality of Collaboration

The ecclesiology of communion guides the spirituality of all those who are engaged in the ministry of the church, not just those in the ordained ministry. All ministers are called to act in a collaborative fashion because by its very nature the church is a community graced with a variety of complimentary gifts so that it may grow in unity and charity (1 Cor 12). As Richard Gaillardetz comments on this Pauline theology of community, it 'is dynamic and organic. It conceives of Christian community as constituted by a shared life in Christ begun in baptism and nurtured in the Eucharist'.¹⁶ To be a member of the church is to be part of an interdependent community of people, where the bonds are both

16. *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 22.

spiritual and concrete. St John speaks eloquently of the how one's love of God has to be expressed in the quality of interpersonal human relationships in the community. He says that there is little point in speaking of one's love for God unless one is showing signs of that love in the way one relates to those with whom one lives and works (1 Jn 4:20-21). The New Testament is probably much more helpful in providing a spirituality for ministry than providing clear guidelines for its structuring. In this respect, too, it is more concerned with a spirituality for communal living and ministering than in providing a spirituality for the individual. Again, Gaillardetz remarks, 'The Christian life is always conceived as a life of shared belonging and discipleship. ... this shared belonging was articulated in a rich variety of metaphors each of which suggested a spiritually grounded in solidarity among believers (e.g., 'the body of Christ', 'a priestly people', 'a flock', 'a fraternity') ... Where formal structures of ministry were considered at all, they were conceived relationally as a call to public service rather than as an opportunity for the discrete exercise of power.'¹⁷ It is quite clear, then, that in the New Testament the call to holiness is not a private affair but a call to be in relationship with God through a pattern of loving, respectful relationships with all those in the community.

As the Christian community settled into the Mediterranean world in the early centuries of its existence, it had to develop and define its structures to carry out its mission. Gradually, because of various historical developments over several centuries the ordering of the community's life accentuated the ranking of the various orders within the church and in the process devalued the foundational significance of baptism for the spiritual life of all its members. The result was that holiness, too, became graded according to the rank that one held in the hierarchy of order. It also became individualised or privatised, as if holiness were primarily or exclusively how one related to God.

Vatican II did much to restore something of the original perspective on holiness and spirituality. In *Lumen gentium*, Chapter 5, the council deals with the universal call to holiness and in Chapter 6 it deals with the religious life, suggesting a parallel with it how it earlier considered the whole People of God before its treatment of the hierarchy. We have to begin with the foundational call to discipleship before talking of any other specific

17. Ibid., 32.

vocations within the community. That first vocation is a call into fellowship with the community of the disciples of Jesus, where one is called and empowered to imitate his compassionate expression of divine love for all people, especially those in the greatest need. The second vocation to religious life is not one that implies or guarantees a greater holiness but invites those who accept it to witness in a particularly public way to the demands of their baptismal calling. Those who enter religious communities offer themselves not just to God but to the whole community as witnesses to the divine desire for all people to grow in the joy of fellowship with the Triune God and with one another. Similarly, the ordained ministry is not about a higher level of holiness, but is a service to the community, reminding it of Christ's initiative towards it, ensuring that it hears God's word addressed to it and that it is helped to respond to that word in the most comprehensive way possible. While the ordained priesthood is essential to the very being of the church, 'it aims at promoting the exercise of the common priesthood of the entire people of God'.¹⁸ The differentiation of roles and ministries in the church, then, is never about superiority or inferiority, it always with a view to service. In the words of *Pastores gregis*: 'Every sort of differentiation in and between the faithful based on the variety of their charisms, functions and ministries is ordered to the service of the other members of the People of God.'¹⁹

A spirituality that is rooted in baptism is one that takes the centrality of *kenosis* seriously, that is, it realises that it is in self-surrender and self-giving that we really rise to new life with Christ. We recognise our own poverty and helplessness and grow in appreciation of the fact that all we have comes from God and not from our own resources. Not only do we depend on God, but we depend on other human persons, too, for all that enables us to flourish and reach our full potential and destiny. God's gifts are at work in them not just for their personal well-being but for the benefit of others as well. This means that not only are we challenged to show great generosity in the service and love that we show for one another, we are equally chal-

18. John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (London: CTS, 1992), #16

19. John Paul II, *Pastores gregis*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (London: CTS, 2003), no 44.

lenced to be humbly receptive to what others can offer us in our poverty and weakness.

All of these considerations bear on the demands that the clustering of parishes will bring to individuals and communities. Unless this kind of spirituality begins to percolate through to all who are involved in the process no amount of new structures or arrangements will enable the full benefits of the opportunity to be experienced. A spirituality of collaboration is the only antidote to the inevitable temptations to competitiveness, careerism, distrust and jealousy that beset individuals and communities who try to work together. Priests who have traditionally tended to see their ministry in individualistic or personal terms are invited now to see what they can learn and receive from other members of the presbyterium and other ministers as well as what they can offer in return. All who are involved in the process of clustering are invited to relinquish some of the possessiveness or pride that they may have had in their own area or community and be willing to accept the gifts of their neighbours or to offer some of their own resources to enable a less richly endowed community to thrive and flourish. Pride can be taken in seeing that all those on whom we border are beginning to grow in stature as communities of the disciples of Jesus.

v) A Renewed Vision of Parish

Parish identity and parish loyalty have become deeply rooted dimensions of Irish life, so much so that 'parish' is often used as a synonym for local community. It is interesting to note, however, that this very central expression of ecclesial life is one that has not been at all well researched by theologians or historians.

The word parish has its origins in a Greek word, *paroikia*, which had two different meanings in the early church. It could mean those who lived close by one another, or it could mean those who were sojourners in an alien land, diaspora communities amidst pagan neighbours. It was only gradually, over centuries, that it came to mean a congregation led by a presbyter or a cluster of congregations led by an *episkopos*. In fact up to the 13th century, parish and diocese were interchangeable terms. Even when dispersed these communities had a sense of connection with one another; they extended hospitality to visitors; sent messages and received news from one another with a sense of solidarity and responsibility towards each other. In this way

they retained a sense of catholicity and communion among themselves.

During the medieval period, major churches in local areas or clusters were distinguished from lesser ones by being designated as baptismal churches, where records of sacramental activity were kept. The presbyter or priest in charge of the major church was the dean and the subordinate churches and their local communities made up the deanery. The deanery in reality was a cluster of parishes in a distinct region of the diocese headed by the dean who assisted the bishop in the administration of the congregation in the area. Other developments at a later stage of the Middle Ages led to a weakening of the sense of partnership among the neighbouring parishes, and this was further compounded by priests adopting a sense of ownership with respect to their parishes. The factors that contributed to this development included the fact that proprietary churches became very common in Europe in the early Middle Ages where the landowner owned the church, the residence and all the church buildings and he appointed the priest to his duties on his territory. This in turn contributed to the presbyter becoming more independent of the bishop and the benefice system developed whereby the priest earned his living from the services that he provided to the parish so that the parish was seen more in terms of providing a living than providing pastoral care. Indeed up to 1983 the parish was both a spiritual reality and a temporal reality – a benefice. This background is significant in that it is part of the residual common memory that often inhibits freedom of pastoral action across parish boundaries.

Contemporary approaches to parish focus less on territorial and economic factors than was the case until relatively recently. Pope John Paul II summarised the present thinking when he said: 'The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather, "the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit", "a familial and welcoming home", "the community of the faithful".'²⁰ Once again the focus is on community and relationships rather than canonical considerations, which often only make sense to the clergy and very little to the regular parishioner. The Pope developed the vision for parish further when he said: 'We believe simply that ... the parish has an indispensable mission of great contemporary importance: to create

20. *Christifideles laici*, 26.

the basic community of the Christian people; to initiate and gather the people in the accustomed expression of liturgical life; to conserve and renew the faith of the people of today; to serve as the school for teaching the salvific message of Christ; to put solidarity in practice and work the humble charity of good and brotherly works.²¹ In the context of the process of clustering this vision is important. The emphasis is on building Christian communities, not safeguarding territory or securing economically viable areas to support a priest. Therefore, it seems to be important that existing communities be supported in their living of their Christian vocation and that they are not manhandled into arrangements that diminish their sense of community simply to satisfy some other strategy that overlooks the priority of communion as both a social and spiritual reality. If the parish is to be considered as a place where people can explore their most fundamental questions and address the deepest longings of their hearts in the light of the gospel, then there has to be a sense of belonging and closeness for this vision to be realised.

Clustering parishes, then, is a delicate and sensitive pastoral agenda. It is not a rationalisation process that one might find in business or industry. It is rather an attempt to ensure that local communities are in the best possible relationship with one another in their efforts to be genuine communities of the disciples of Jesus Christ. The process is profoundly relational and grounded in the reality of the church as a communion of communities. This is not a purely human achievement but is also the work of God's Holy Spirit whose gifts are generously given to lead all the disciples of Jesus into a deeper fellowship and unity with one another and with the Triune God.

21. *Ibid.*