Shepherds and Sheep: Parish Reconfiguration, Authority, and Activism in a Catholic Diocese

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Abstract This mixed method study describes contention over parish reconfiguration in a northeast Catholic diocese, and a case study of one merged parish. Guided by social movement theories about collective action frames and political opportunities in mobilizatio0n, we outline the diocesan frame of reconfiguration and the counter frame developed by activists who organized to oppose the process. While the diocesan frame focused on a shortage of priests that officials believed demanded reconfiguration of financially burdened parishes, the lay counter frame shifted the debate to questions about the role of the laity in the contemporary Catholic Church and what they perceived as failed leadership from their bishop. Our case study of Resurrection Parish shows how the merged process and the activists' opposition to their diocesan leaders resulted in a parish that works to ensure the involvement of the laity, and continues to publicly dissent from Catholic leaders.

Keywords Catholicism, Parishes, Priests, Authority, Activism, Organizations, Protest, Framing

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Research on church closure is rare (Hadaway 1982; McKinney and Hoge 1983), but understanding the complete life course of one of America's primary voluntary associations (Harris 1988) and its consequences for religious organizations and believers is a key to understanding American religion (Dougherty, Maier, and Vander Lugt 2008). This is particularly true of contemporary American Catholicism. Over the last two decades Roman Catholic dioceses in the United States have responded to the declining number of ordained sacramental ministers - priests (Zech 1994; Stark and Finke 2000), and to lay Catholic demographic trends with reconfiguration of local parishes (Bergengren 2008a,2008b; Hartzell 2009; Zech and Gautier 2004). Of particular sociological interest, but not well studied by sociologists or religious professionals (Davidson and Fournier 2006), is the mobilization of Catholic laity to counter the Church's framing of ongoing changes, and the consequences of reconfiguration for parishes.

We use multiple sources of data to document conflict that arose around one diocese's plans for reconfiguration and make sense of these data with the sensitizing concepts (Padgett 2004) of political opportunity (Meyer and Minkoff 2004) and framing (Benford and Snow 2000). Our analysis also considers how lay Catholics think about their parishes and leadership, and how activists speak about authority figures, adding to a growing literature about such questions (D'Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013). First, while our paper is about contention in the diocese and not a full analysis of structural and demographic changes affecting the diocese, we briefly outline the hierarchy's framing of ongoing changes in the diocese and its plans to react to the changes. Next, we describe how these plans were framed by activists in the diocese, and how the activism and frame became an integral part of a new parish community that was born via a parish

merger. Representatives of the merged parish contend that it successfully managed its transition by becoming a 'radically welcoming,' inclusive community that embraces a progressive and activist stance vis-à-vis the institutional church. We argue that anti-reconfiguration activism and the culture of the successfully merged parish are each the result of opportunities born of the diocesan reconfiguration plan.

Our participatory action research project (one of us was involved in lay activism in the diocese and at the new parish) formed in the context of significant changes in the diocese of Syracuse, New York. Identifying an emerging and worsening priest shortage, the diocese began planning for changes as early as the 1980s. What form this reorganization would take was unclear into the early 2000s, when geographically near parishes were asked to work together to provide pastoral care as part of Pastoral Care Areas (PCAs). Asked by the diocese to plan for the future, each set of connected parishes in a PCA was required to include a 'merger option.' In the middle years of the decade the diocese announced a process to close nearly 40 parishes (Gadoua 2008). The coming mergers and closures called many in the diocese to reflect on the significance of the parish in Catholic life, and also met with significant resistance to the process and its outcomes. We designed a mixed-method study to learn about this resistance and its outcomes.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to explore individual level questions about identity, commitment, and attitudes about authority, we conducted a number of semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of affected parishes across the diocese, priests, and one representative of the diocese. Lay respondents were identified, initially, by contacting a local group of laity organized in response to the reconfiguration. This organization, Preserve Our Parishes (POP)[1], was founded in the summer of 2009 and quickly gathered members from across the diocese. It is important to note

that POP was organized to resist the diocesan plan for reconfiguration, and therefore its members' attitudes best reflect highly motivated, activist Catholics – the group we are most interested in for this article. Interviews followed a very general schedule, but the strategy was to let people tell their stories as they saw fit. We sought to learn about individual religious biographies as they involved parishes: when and why did informants become active at the parish, how were they involved at the parish, how were they involved in decisions related to parish closing and mergers, and what are their opinions about parish and diocesan leadership. Second, we asked informants what they valued about their parish, former and current parishes if appropriate, and what they valued about being Catholic. When given permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed.

A second approach to study individual level questions was a brief survey sent to all members of POP's email list. The web-based survey was sent to the approximately 200 names on the organization's email list, and 98 complete and 27 partially completed surveys – totaling 125 – were returned. It is important to keep the limitations of this survey in mind when interpreting its results. It is not a representative sample of laity in the diocese, but rather is representative of highly motivated members of an organization founded to protest decisions of diocesan authorities. Related to the survey, we also regularly attended the organization's monthly meetings, as well as two diocesan wide, lay-run conferences, one of which was effectively the first of the organization's activities. We gathered field notes as another method of learning about lay responses to diocesan reconfiguration, and we collected many documents the organization produced.

The primary method to address questions about the parish level of analysis is a case study of one merged parish in the diocese. At this parish we have conducted a series of focus groups

and in-depth interviews with relevant constituencies, including the pastoral council and a merger steering committee. We have also interviewed the pastor multiple times, asking questions about the process of merging two parishes into one, and attended religious services frequently before and after the merger date. One of us served in an administrative position at this parish, and as such was closely involved in its organization and development before and after the merger. We draw on these experiences as data interpreted alongside that gathered using other methodologies. Finally, we administered an 'in the pew' survey the weekend of September 11th and 12th 2010. Two-hundred and ninety-six surveys were completed at a parish with a reported membership of just over 400. While this parish is the only one studied to this degree, we also interviewed pastors from 2 other parishes in the diocese affected by reconfiguration, and we attended services at multiple affected parishes.

We have, over the years, collected a large amount of documentation related to reconfiguration from the parishes, activist organization, and diocese. The majority of diocesan documents produced as part of the reconfiguration planning were made available on the web page of the Office of Pastoral Planning. The two primary documents we refer to are the pastoral letters "A People of Faith" (Diocese of Syracuse 1988) and "Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry" (Diocese of Syracuse 2001). Other letters from the bishops to parishes and from the bishop to the lay activist organization are also considered as data. From the lay activist organization we have collected minutes, flyers, and pamphlets from 2 conferences held in the diocese. We have also collected the text of homilies given in parishes, meeting minutes, as well as bulletins and other similar items. While this article draws on only a subset of these data, we describe its breadth as evidence of our effort to understand the complexity of this organizational change.

DATA ANALYSIS

We provide an interpretation of how leaders and lay activists made sense of changes in a Catholic diocese and the wider Church, and how different understandings resulted in mobilization and conflict. Collective action frames help actors make meaning of their environment, and help to guide action (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). The diocese was first to make public its framing of demographic and structural changes in the region, via public comments and two pastoral letters released in 1988 and 2001. The diocesan frame resulted in a plan for diocesan reconfiguration. The plan involved closing and merging parishes throughout the diocese and provided lay activists with a "problematic condition" (Benford and Snow 2000: 615) that led to reflection on the meaning of their parishes, the actions of their bishops and priests, and their own Catholic identities. It was also a key opportunity for those with a history of activism to mobilize others without such a history against local Catholic authority figures (Meyer and Minkoff 2004: 1462).

What emerged was a lay movement that questioned the diocesan plan for reconfiguration by shifting the debate from concerns about the priest shortage and financially challenged parishes to a conversation about legitimate Catholic authority and the nature of parishes. Like many American Catholics who have come to rely on their own consciences as much or more than Church leaders when choices must be made (D'Antonio et al. 2013: 77), many of the activists we spoke to pointed to Vatican II as an event that was meant to give the laity greater voice in Church leadership. In the lay frame, Vatican II symbolized a spirit of collaboration many thought the diocese had engaged in only superficially, and in the process had violated their trust and profaned the sacred space of Catholic parishes. The data we provide below fit framing

and political opportunity theories well, and we also show how the lay frame born of the contested reconfiguration plan influenced the development of our case study parish.

Diocesan Frame

According to an interview with a representative of the diocesan office for pastoral planning, discussions of reconfiguration began in 1982 when the likelihood of a long term priest shortage became a concern. The Vicar for Parishes, who was involved in the original discussions, told us that the diocese "began to do a straight line projection of the age of the priests. It was just a matter of add 10 years, add 20 years to it, look at the number of guys you got in the seminary and project what you will have in terms of personnel." These preliminary analyses led to the formation of a priest council committee to develop strategies for involving parishes in the process of responding to the data. At that point, "the executive committee of the priest council, of which I was a member, decided to write a pastoral letter to get the Bishop's signature of approval...And that's on the web by the way, it's called A People of Faith."

This letter, along with *Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry* which was released in 2001, outlines the diocesan understanding of the issues calling for reconfiguration, and these are the primary data we use to understand the diocesan framing of reconfiguration. Both of the pastoral letters about changes in the diocese rely heavily on demographic data about the region and Church statistics about the size of the Catholic population and the declining number of priests available. Echoing the interview conducted with the Vicar for Parishes, which involved an extended conversation about the changing economy and shrinking population of the region, the letters evaluate the demographics of the diocese and its priests, projecting a significant reduction in the number of the ordained over the coming decades. The diocesan office for

pastoral planning saw a staffing issue, and was concerned about distributing available resources across its territory.

Asked specifically about the goal of reconfiguration, the diocesan representative responded that "the goal of any plan of reconfiguration is creating stable, healthy, vibrant parishes." How would this be achieved? Appearing to open the door to lay leaders as a way to keep churches open, *A People of Faith* asks parishioners to think about what parishes will look like in the future, and to consider "new leadership styles" saying that "very soon, some faith communities will be led by deacons, sisters, or specially trained members of the laity" (Diocese of Syracuse 1988: 2). The letter says that the "local parish holds a special place in the loyalties of the people of the diocese" and that this "truth also impacts upon our attempts to deal administratively and realistically with alternative leadership forms" (Diocese of Syracuse 1988: 2). Arguing that the bishop is concerned with the "health and vitality" of parish communities, the letter reads "We are not primarily concerned with the closing of parishes," but "in the future some of our parishes may close and/or experience a blending with another community" (Diocese of Syracuse 1988: 3).

The primary themes of this letter are the reality of the priest shortage, that the laity should be prepared for other potential forms of leadership, but also a clear note that parishes that are not "viable" (Diocese of Syracuse 1988: 3) may have to be closed. Years later, in the service of identifying vibrant parishes, the diocese did develop quantitative measures of parish vitality. For example, a parish where funerals outpaced baptisms four to three would be considered at risk, as would a parish that could reasonably serve all its members with one mass. Poor scores on these metrics suggested a parish that was drawing more resources than it could justify.

The process of making these decisions about the future of parishes was meant to be a collaborative and cooperative relationship involving many constituencies, and the diocese wanted to achieve flourishing, active parishes. Illustrating this intention, for example, is the 2001 pastoral letter *Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry* which considers the possibility of increased lay participation in the daily operations of parish life (Diocese of Syracuse 2001), suggesting that the laity would serve a more active role in running parishes in the future. A further example of collaborative sentiment can be found in the Pastoral Care Area (PCAs) committees that were established to develop plans for linked parish futures. During his interview, the Vicar of Parishes reported that, "We asked folks to use as wide of a collaborative process as possible…The coordinating group for the cluster…was the pastor, the two lay trustees, the parish council president, and the parish council vice president. The reason for the structure was the pastor belongs there…The trustees represent the legal corporation in the state. The parish council president and vice president, theoretically, represent the collaborative unit of the parish, in terms of pastoral vision."

We see, in the pastoral letters and our interview with the Vicar for Parishes, the diocesan frame of the reconfiguration process. The diocese understood the ongoing changes primarily as a problem of matching available pastoral resources to current lay pastoral needs. A declining count of priests and shifting demographics among the laity resulted in what they interpreted as shrinking, aging parishes where priest personnel were being inefficiently deployed. The number of priests in the diocese did not well match the number of parishes, and as such priests should be assigned to quantitatively vibrant parishes (i.e. those with more baptisms and fewer funerals), and struggling parishes should be suppressed and/or merged with others so that what remained was a smaller set of more engaged Catholic communities. The diocesan frame makes clear that

these decisions, while unpleasant, must be made for the health of the local church. The pastoral letters and our interview with the Vicar for Parishes suggest that lay involvement was important to the diocese, and that they wanted these decisions to be made cooperatively.

Lay Counter Frame

The lay frame countered the diocesan positions on parish vibrancy and the cooperative nature of the reconfiguration process. Further, lay activists criticized potential long term consequences of parish closures that they believed were disproportionately affecting urban and rural parishes relative to those in suburbs. In 2009, a group we will call Preserve Our Parishes (POP) held a daylong conference for Catholics in the diocese interested in protecting their parishes from potential closure. The conference's keynote speaker was Peter Borre, chair of the Boston based Council of Parishes, and a consultant for many parishes across the United States appealing their closures to the Vatican (O'Malley 2012). POP quickly gained members from across the diocese, and came together to oppose the official process of reconfiguration, to defend parishes that had yet to close, and to support parishes that chose to appeal their closures.

At its initial conference, Preserve Our Parishes circulated a petition meant to be shared throughout the diocese and then delivered to the bishop. It read:

> We the undersigned members of the Syracuse Catholic Diocese respectfully ask that you call a moratorium on parish reconfigurations so the process to date can, with input from the laity, be evaluated; and based on that evaluation, the diocese and the laity together can create a more grounded plan to meet the needs of the Church of Syracuse. In brief, we have deep concerns about the following components of the present process: 1) One Priest, One Roof policy 2) Hurried parish closings, 3) Absence of the laity on the decision-making body,

4) Diminishing Catholic presence in our urban centers, 5) Abandonment of rural parishes.

The petition clearly articulates important elements of the activist counter frame. First, the laity criticized what they would refer to as the "One Priest, One Roof" policy favored by the bishop (often phrased "one priest, one parish" in conversation). Next, they disagreed with local leader's claims that the process that led to closures was thoughtful and collaborative. Finally, they were concerned about a local Church that would have no urban or rural presence, but would rather serve only the suburbs.

While some activists involved with POP doubted the reality of the priest shortage, and therefore questioned the need for reconfiguration, most agreed that changes to the existing model of parishes with resident priests were necessary. However, they opposed the diocesan plan to match existing pastoral resources with a smaller number of parishes. The activists' short-hand reference to the diocesan plan was 'one priest, one parish,' while they preferred to explore other models of Catholic community which would be less dependent upon resident priests. Many of the activists felt Catholic parishes could be vibrant with lay leaders handling most daily administrative tasks, and relying on shared priests for delivery of the sacraments. They saw reconfiguration as an opportunity to adopt new models of Catholic parish life that would preserve their existing parishes, and hoped that the collaborative spirit of reconfiguration would allow them to convince their bishop that these models could work.

The two pastoral letters related to reconfiguration in the diocese did call for increased lay participation, especially *Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry* (Diocese of Syracuse 2001), and the activists would regularly point to these documents as support for their goals. How,

then, did ‘one priest, one parish’ become part of the activist frame? Our interview with the Vicar for Parishes directly addressed this question, so we quote at length:

> Interviewer: I have heard some people characterize the plan as “one priest, one parish.” How far does that go into explaining the logic of reconfiguration plan?
>
> Respondent: It doesn’t at all. However in fairness to those to whom that’s a burning issue… I have only heard that from one person. He was the bishop of Syracuse, but I only heard it from one person. And I only heard it in one location, the diocesan pastoral council as he was trying to go to a sense of urgency, and as he was trying to explain to the people in the room that the median age of a priest is 67 years of age, and do you really think a 67 year old guy should be caring for different places? Do you think we are in a situation right now where there are resources to maintain the footprint we’ve got given the economic downturn?

The Vicar’s response denies ‘one priest, one parish’ as a valid explanation of the diocesan approach to reconfiguration, but also confirms that the parish priest model was publicly endorsed by the bishop even as other official statements suggested openness to increased lay participation in parish administration. Along with the refutation of the activists’ claim is his restatement of the diocesan framing of the reconfiguration being rooted in regional demographic and economic changes.

According to the Vicar, the primary motivations of reconfiguration are an aging priesthood and rightsizing the number of parishes to the current capacity of the diocese. However, the bishop’s public statement was understood by many of the most ardent activists (“those to whom that’s a burning issue”) as the most basic value motivating reconfiguration – the

centrality of the priest. The activist frame, therefore, moved attention away from the demographic changes and toward questions of Catholic authority and the role of the laity in running the Church. It asked: Was the process of reconfiguration 'truly' collaborative and open to lay input, or did the bishop's 'one priest, one roof' statement reflect the leadership's 'real' intention to maintain traditional Catholic teaching prioritizing a parish priest (Wills 2013; Loveland 2013; Congregation for the Clergy 2002) over the laity, and ignoring other models used elsewhere (Gray, Gautier, and Cidade 2011)?

Analytically, the opposing frames appear to be grounded in different understandings of the meaning of the parish and priest. The diocesan frame suggests that the parish is a location where Catholic services are delivered by a Catholic priest to a Catholic population. The parish, according to this model, is a manifestation of the organization, to be planned and deployed by the chancery to efficiently manage available professional resources. The laity, as we document below, knew the parish as a place where they helped to produce the sacred and came to be with God. Reconfiguration, if it involved closing parishes, was understood by activists as a threat to sacred space that could remain available without a permanent priest. What Weber might have called a bureaucratic threat to religious enchantment, one member of POP referred to as "killing God," and others regularly referred to as a regressive attack on the "people of God" who had been elevated through the work of Vatican II.

The diocesan frame may have led to the leadership underestimating the degree to which those in the pews understood the parish as significant outside of the organizational structure and Church teachings about priests (Wills 2013). Several of the activists we interviewed told stories that revealed the complex ways Catholics understand the meaning of parishes and priests. One of our first interviews was with Ken, a middle aged, white, and well educated member of an LGBT

Catholic group which initially met in a Protestant church, but had been meeting at a recently closed progressive Catholic parish, St. Dorothy, for nearly 20 years. He described the motivation for the group's move as a desire to worship in "Catholic space." Asked what made the parish a comfortable Catholic space, Ken replied that it was "a Vatican II community" where the pastor accepted his group without hesitation, even though they were gay, because he understood it as a way to empower a group of laity who wanted to worship. Ken, like others we talked to, invokes Vatican II as a symbol of the parish's active and lay-centered culture.

Emily, a white, retired professional explained the same parish in similar terms. Emily joined the parish in the mid 1960s, initially because it was close to home and offered a good religious education program for her children. However, she was also happy to find a parish that promoted social justice and seemed open to progress within the Catholic tradition:

> I: Tell me a little bit about what was going on at St. Dorothy that you liked.
>
> R: Well first of all it was a small church where everyone knew everyone. It was very active, very social justice oriented. And there was a good religious education program … and the liturgy over the years. When we moved there it was still a bit um, I don't think that, had the priest turned around to face the people?
>
> I: In '65? It was right around then that it was going on.
>
> R: Yea, yea and whenever there were changes having to do with Vatican II things, [the parish] was always at the forefront in implementing those changes.

Like Ken, Emily makes reference to her sense of community when she speaks of it as a "small church where everyone knew everyone," and the parish's general 'social justice' culture. She also references Vatican II when explaining what she valued about the parish. To Emily, a

vibrant parish is a community dedicated to social justice and religious progress. Emily believes that Vatican II was a good thing because it modernized the Catholic Church and gave voice to the laity, and her parish was right for her because it was at the forefront of Catholic modernization. Emily saw her parish's closure as evidence that diocesan leadership had given up on the promises of Vatican II at the expense of the laity.

Emily's notion was supported by at least one parish priest – the priest who had previously served at her closed parish, St. Dorothy. In an interview, and also in a homily delivered at a recently merged parish on the anniversary of his ordination, Fr. Paul directly criticized the diocesan reconfiguration process in general, and parish closings in particular. Referencing The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, which was produced during Vatican II, Fr. Paul argued that the diocesan reconfiguration process was "dismantling Vatican II" and in an interview he criticized the "clericalism" of the diocese in protecting the priests before parishes and parishioners. This message, delivered from the altar of a merged parish in the diocese, sums up well how many Catholics understand the meaning of parish life and tells us much about the lay framing of the ills of reconfiguration. Inside this frame, community and vibrant parish life are born of Vatican II ideas about 'the people of God,' and the pastor is expected to be true to those values by giving preference to the laity rather than the institutional church.

The words of another parishioner describing the closed progressive parish make this point well. Rachel, a middle aged white professional, was asked about what initially attracted her to St. Dorothy:

> "It was amazing, this is what Church is! It's not just about coming and doing a routine and leaving. It's about forming a community. When they came together on Sunday it was a family. It was a family. It was a community that

> believed in what they were worshipping. Father just 'shows up.' It's not about him, he's there to do what he needs to do but it really is left up to the people to be the participants."

For many we interviewed, the parish building also becomes meaningful because of its role in biography. As a location for formative events like baptisms, confirmations, and weddings, the parish takes on personal religious meaning that is often more important to the individual than its organizational function in the Church. The parish church is sacred not because it is functionally a place to meet with a priest, but, our data suggest, because it is the site of these personal encounters with God. Closing the building, therefore, denies access to sacred space. The priest, while obviously necessary for successful sacramental celebrations, does not make the space sacred, but rather it is a lifetime of sacred experiences that endow the space with its meaning. The priest, while present, is not prioritized in this part of the lay framework.

While many interviewees made references to the sacraments, the words of Samantha, a working class, white woman from a recently closed parish reveal the direct connection between ritual experiences, family, biography, and Catholic spirituality, and do not include explicit references to priests. Asked about her involvement at the parish, Samantha responded:

> "I'm 44 years old and I've been a parishioner all my life. I made all my sacraments there, my sisters made all their sacraments there, I was married there, my father was buried there. I went to school there - before they closed the school, Ha! Um, so I have very strong ties to the church, and very strong ties to a lot of people."

Asked what she valued about her soon to close church building, she continued:

> "It's not just a building. I've been on several committees about this whole merging thing, from parish councils and several other committees. And people have said they're just buildings, and no, they aren't just buildings…It's a spiritual home. I know I can pray to God wherever, just like I know I can talk to my dad wherever I want, but going to the cemetery means something more. Going to the church means something more."

For Samantha, the parish is a place where one experiences the sacred within family ties, and on that groundwork maintains fictive kinship with others. Her comments suggest that her connection to god is strongest in this place because of her history there, and privileges her own experiences over the role of the priest. This is a clear contrast to the diocesan frame which privileges priests over places.

The image of a parish as a space meaningful outside of Church organization and theology was clearly expressed by another member of Samantha's parish. Jonathan, a middle aged, Korean male, who refused audio recording, addressed the question of whether or not the church building, slated for closure, was 'just a building.' In doing so, he spoke of a connection with those who had built the church building generations before he became active there. To paraphrase Jonathan from interview notes:

> 'I like the building and its glamorous interior. Some people criticize Catholic churches for being too beautiful. They don't understand that people were happy to create that. It's not just a building. Generations have put their mind and soul into that building and that makes it sacred.'

Considered together, our interviews with lay Catholics in the diocese reveal that the parish becomes a meaningful place in ways besides the organizational structure of the Church and the sacramental role of the priest. Whereas the diocesan frame casts parishes and priests as resources to be efficiently deployed in the face of structural change, the lay frame posits the parish as a place that should be protected from change because of its sacredness, its culture, and its place in personal biography and Catholic history.

Whereas the diocese framed reconfiguration as a collaborative and pastoral process, the laity we interviewed instead framed reconfiguration as a result of leadership that failed their flock by prioritizing organizational needs over those of the faithful. Pointing to the requirement that PCAs include a merger option in the plans they presented to the bishop, activists felt that the diocese never seriously considered other models of parish life, like shared priests, non-diocesan priests, or parish life coordinators (Gray, Gautier, and Cidade 2011; Hendricks 2009; Mogilka and Wiskus 2009), which they believe would have elevated the place of the laity in the spirit of the pastoral letters. Instead, they accused their leadership of a clericalism that minimized the spiritual needs of those affected by parish closures.

Perhaps the best illustration of this criticism is the 'sheep and shepherd' metaphor sometimes used by laity to express discontent and attack the legitimacy of diocesan leaders and their decisions about reconfiguration. While not all of those who used the metaphor liked to refer to the faithful as 'sheep,' the symbol of the shepherd was used to evoke a model of Catholic community in which the laity trust leaders who tend carefully to the spiritual needs of their flock. Here we analyze its use by a speaker at the first POP conference and in a lay homily delivered by a former member of a closed parish. In each case, the metaphor was used as a direct critique of the diocese's reconfiguration frame, and in particular the 'one priest, one roof' policy.

In his lay homily, Mike, an older, white member of the relatively progressive and recently closed St. Dorothy's reflected on the process of reconfiguration as it had affected he and his fellow parishioners.

> "It's only within the last two years that the word 'shepherd,' as bishops choose to call themselves, … has caused me serious concern…Our previous shepherd…counted, explained, lost a few sheep, and moved on with his caring words 'change is difficult.'"

Within the boundaries of the lay frame, reconfiguration was rational and bureaucratic. It failed to provide 'pastoral' care – to charismatically 'shepherd the trusting sheep' in the care of the Church.

Speaking at the POP conference, Andrea, a middle-aged, white, professional woman who belonged to a relatively conservative and soon to be merged parish, described the reactions of fellow parishioners as talk of merger increased, and clearly distinguishes between pastoral and bureaucratic leadership.

> "Some of our parishioners stopped going…This is hard to say, but this is what the process brought us to…because they felt betrayed by our *administrator* and could not receive the sacraments from him."

Andrea, her voice strained, suggests that their parish priest, referred to by many from this parish only as 'the administrator,' had violated the sanctity of the sacraments because he was suspected of working closely with the diocese to close the parish.

Like Andrea, many who criticized their bishops and priests found it a difficult task. They wanted to trust their leaders, to grant them a privileged position in their narrative of the church. Criticism of local leaders was often carefully stated, and legitimated with references to the

greater authorities of the Pope, Jesus, or God, or immediately contrasted with other local leaders who were considered exemplary. The lay framing of reconfiguration and its shortcomings, then, does not reject all Catholic authority, but rather authorities who serve the needs of the organization over the needs of the faithful. For example, at the first meeting of POP, members debated how they should state their goals and publicize their mission. The first goal reads, "We are a group of Catholics who acknowledge the authority of the Bishop yet believe he is making a mistake by closing so many churches in the diocese." In a section of a handout circulated at the initial meeting titled "What Drives Us," they write "We believe, as the Pope recently proclaimed, that the Catholic Church is the only church founded by Jesus Christ and we want it to flourish…and be healthy as the Bishop states…We want the pure unadulterated Catholic faith handed down by our fathers to again leaven the bread of this world."

Andrea, in her POP conference presentation, said more about her parish "administrator." "Not one of us point out his contradictions. We are good sheep. I find myself saying, 'yes father,' 'thank you father,' much more than I had planned." She then concluded her remarks with a general statement about the relationship between laity and leaders in her diocese which questions the legitimacy of diocesan leaders with the use of the sheep and shepherd metaphor:

> "What I am learning is that there is so much the diocese can do to control a parish and so little parishioners are able to control. And it's very aggravating to people who feel it is OUR church…. Paradoxically, with our lack of power, we are told that it is our fault the church is closing. The parishioners are to be blamed. Another paradox is that the Catholic Church holds the immovable position that it is wrong to kill something viable because it doesn't fit into your plan and yet we are being stifled because we don't fit into a plan. That is not

> pastoral, but devious. Isn't it also paradoxical that our leaders repeatedly refer to themselves as shepherds guiding their flock but will deliberately weaken a member of the flock in order to kill it off. Some of my fellow parishioners did not want me to speak so strongly against our leaders, but I cannot help it. This process has destroyed my belief in our shepherds and I don't want to be a sheep anymore."

BECOMING RESURRECTION PARISH

At the parish level, our case study of the congregation we will call Resurrection Parish (RP) reveals how the lay framing of reconfiguration, and the associated activism, influenced the development of a new parish community. Resurrection Parish was the result of the official merger of two prior parishes, St. Thomas and St. Martin. The two parishes were located relatively near one another, and were similar in many ways. Each parish, however, had defining features which made it unique relative to other parishes in the city. These features would affect their process of merging into one community, and also become elements of that new community. We briefly describe the parishes and their merger process, and then argue that this process and the lay frame of reconfiguration is essential to the sort of parish RP has become.

St. Martin was located in a predominantly African American neighborhood and very near one of the poorest census tracts in the city. In the year 2000, the adjacent census tract was 74% African American, and 66% of families lived in poverty. While the parish membership could not be described as primarily African American, its black Catholic membership and location on the edge of a mostly black neighborhood helped to shape its image within the local Catholic community as a Black Church, and led to its adoption of St. Martin de Porres as its patron saint. For 20 years one of its defining features was its gospel choir which performed at its 9 a.m.

Sunday mass. More than simply a Black Catholic parish, however, one former member, a middle aged African American woman, told us that it would be better to describe St. Martin as a "multi-cultural parish" that valued its members from many ethnic communities.

St. Thomas was situated very closely to a nationally recognized research university, and drew heavily from the university's Catholic faculty and its graduate and undergraduate student body. Members would say that this proximity influenced parish culture in a progressive and welcoming direction, and this culture became important in the process of merger. St. Thomas' census tract was 86% white, with only 4% of families living in poverty. An African American member of St. Thomas, interviewed for our study, recalled a parish that was mostly white but welcoming to worshippers of color. Members of St. Thomas understood themselves a socially conscious parish, which was mostly liberal politically, if relatively traditional in terms of worship style.

In conversations about those things that were most valued at St. Martin, the gospel choir emerged as one of its defining features. A rousing gospel choir rendition of "When the Saints Come Marching In" opened the first 9 a.m. Sunday morning service at Resurrection Parish. The 9 a.m. mass at RP became known as the Gospel Choir mass, drawing heavily from those who had previously attended St. Martin. Two other masses filled out the weekend schedule. The first, on Saturday evenings, is known as the Traditional Music mass, while the 11:30 a.m. Sunday gathering is known as the Contemporary Music mass. Members who were previously at St. Thomas are equally likely to be found at the contemporary or traditional music masses, but are somewhat less likely to attend the gospel choir mass. The Contemporary Music mass is also the one most frequently attended by former members of St Dorothy, the progressive parish mentioned above.

The diocese has closed or plans to close up to forty parishes (Gadoua 2008). One of the closed parishes, St. Dorothy, was 1.2 miles from RP and shut its doors just over two months after RP opened its own. A significant number of former St. Dorothy parishioners chose RP as their new parish. St. Dorothy was known by many as the most progressive Catholic parish in the diocese, its homilies more likely to be delivered by a lay member than its assigned priest. St. Dorothy was also home, for nineteen years, to the LGBT Catholics and Friends group. St. Dorothy's closure forced the LGBT group to find a new home, and upon an invitation from RP's pastor, chose RP, bringing with them a fourth group playing a significant role in the new parish. Besides those who had previously been committed to one of these 3 parishes, RP has attracted a number of new members who were previously connected to other Catholic parishes (some of which were also closed by the diocese), other non-Catholic religious communities, and some who have no prior place of worship. Indicative of the mixed make up of RP was its first pastoral council which was composed of four members from St. Martin, four from St. Thomas, and four from the parish's 'new' members.

Is RP community? This is of course a difficult question to answer, but results of the 'in-pew' survey indicate a sense of togetherness among its members. Asked if RP was community, 76% of respondents agreed that it was, and majorities of those from the former parishes also agreed. Further, 88% reported that they found RP welcoming, and 51% say they have close friends at the new parish. Perhaps most interesting, however, is that 97% of respondents described RP as 'diverse.' These data, then, suggest that RP is understood by its members as a welcoming, diverse community. How did this community come to be what it is, and to do what it does?

Conflict and Communion

Before becoming Resurrection Parish, St. Martin and St. Thomas, each within the city limits, were in a PCA that included the campus ministry at the nearby research university, the rural St. James, and the large suburban parish St. Ferdinand. According to the plan originally presented to the parishes of the PCA, within 2 years there would be only one diocesan priest available to meet the needs of the area. At this time the rural parish, St. James, was being treated as a "mission" of St. Ferdinand, with various diocesan priests being assigned to conduct services and attend to administrative responsibilities. St. Martin and St. James were at this time "linked," meaning they were sharing a pastor and developing shared pastoral plans.

While the other parishes in the PCA were strapped for resources and pastoral leadership, suburban St. Ferdinand was lead by an influential diocesan priest, in the midst of a significant capital campaign, and had begun construction of a larger church building. All of this was seen by those at the other parishes as evidence of the inevitability of being merged into St. Ferdinand; it was according to one informant "the handwriting on the wall." However, wanting to cooperate with the process as outlined by the diocese, the two urban parishes entered into a process of planning for the future of the PCA. In meetings with representatives from each site, including St. Ferdinand's pastor, members of St. Thomas and St. Martin began to recognize and articulate the core characteristics of their communities. Their urban locations, relative to the other members of the PCA, became a focal point, and quite quickly fueled their joint reluctance to fold into the larger, suburban parish St. Ferdinand. Defending an urban Catholic presence was now a rallying point for members of St. Martin and St. Thomas.

At this stage of the planning, St. Thomas' relationship with the nearby university campus ministry became important. The campus ministry was being administered and served sacraments by a priest of the Franciscan order, which had established a range of ministries within the

diocese. St. Thomas had established a long-time relationship with the campus ministry, which had in the years just prior to the reconfiguration process, been renewed with an active partnership addressed toward meeting the needs of students. Informal conversations proposing that St. Thomas become a "University" parish had been taking place over those years just prior to the diocesan reconfiguration directive. Central to this line of thinking was a sense of the richness that the "university" population, including undergrad, graduate, international students, faculty and staff, brought to St. Thomas. Significant to this population, members of which often choose to live in the urban university neighborhood, was an embrace of a "counter-cultural" progressive orientation.

St. Thomas and St. Martin, now in conversation about retaining an urban Catholic presence, reinvigorated discussions with the Franciscan Chaplain at the university. Such an arrangement, it was argued, would help the diocese achieve their goal of pastoral planning in the PCA, despite the announced "priest-shortage," by incorporating a non-diocesan priest into diocesan ministry. Members of the planning committee were in fact influenced in pursuing this proposal by statements made by the Diocesan Vicar for Parishes that such a parish and university collaboration was, according to an informant, "just the kind of creative thinking" the diocese was looking for. This proposal was enthusiastically embraced by the university and members of St. Thomas, and supported by representatives of St. Martin. The planning committee of the two urban parishes pursued such a relationship with the university, and received initial informal, but written, approval of the Franciscan Provincial and a least one member of the Chancery.

This confluence of factors brought to the surface of PCA discussions what had been a core of the concerns of the two city parishes - diversity. As noted previously, though African-Americans did not comprise the majority of the membership of St. Martin, the parish had for a

number of historical demographic reasons, become the largest active community of African-American Catholics in the diocese. The parish took seriously its identity as the "home of Black-Catholics," as described by an informant who had spent over 2 decades at the parish, and took considerable pride in its Gospel Choir and active association with the Diocesan Office of Black Catholics. Parishioners of St. Martin made reference to their feeling that the imminent closure of their parish was the latest in a history of discriminatory actions toward the Black-Catholic community. A significant feature of St. Martin's collective memory was the closure of what had been the historic parish home of Black Catholics. A period of urban-renewal had prompted the diocese to merge that parish into what at that time was an all white Irish Catholic Parish outside of the city neighborhood home of a majority of the African-American community. Many members of the black community reported never feeling welcomed into this ethnically Irish parish.

The Black Catholic community continued to carry a sense that they and their spirituality had been discounted and neglected by the diocese, and that the sense of community built at St. Martin was hard-won with little support from outside. It is significant that several of the black Catholics we interviewed reported feeling unwelcome at St. Ferdinand, the suburban parish they expected to soon be merged into. One African American male reported familiarity with St. Ferdinand because his children had attended its school. He related a story about meeting with the school's principal because his son was being bullied about his race. He was happy with how the situation was handled, but speaking about the large, suburban parish he explicitly mentions how race mattered differently at St. Ferdinand:

> "Well, it was too big and it was too white. There are very few people of color in the parish…there were not that many people of color at St. Thomas, but

> you still [felt] more at home. I did not get the feeling of warmth at Ferdinand that I have at St Thomas or St. Martin."

While overt racism was never discussed, a sense that black Catholics were less welcome at St. Ferdinand than at the urban parishes was a significant dynamic of the merger steering committee's work. It contributed to St. Martin and St. Thomas shifting from a stance of cooperation with the diocesan planning process to one of conscious resistance and eventually, to one labeled by a diocesan leader at a public meeting as "dangerous" and "subversive." At a meeting early in the PCA planning process, St. Thomas and St. Martin were granted the autonomy to plan for one new parish within the city limits, and separate from the suburban St. Ferdinand. As a result of conflict with the suburban parish they had been paired with, and together resisting what they believed was the diocese's plan to close both urban parishes, St. Thomas and St. Martin were now becoming one community.

INSTITUTIONALIZING THE LAY FRAME

Resurrection Parish held its first mass in the fall of 2009, only a few months after the founding of Preserve Our Parishes. The work those from St. Martin and St. Thomas did to merge influenced the development of POP, and RP was in turn affected by the organization's activism. For example, the petition circulated at POP's first conference criticizes the reconfiguration process for neglecting urban and rural parishes, a serious concern for those who were involved in the Pastoral Care Area that eventually produced RP (and other active members of POP). Fr. John, the new priest assigned to RP, was also a somewhat regular attendee at POP's monthly meetings of Catholics from across the diocese. While the activist frame criticized diocesan leaders thought to be defending the organization rather than the faithful, Fr. John was regarded as a priest who would defend the interests of the laity. Our case study of the parish suggests that the

work POP did to frame reconfiguration as failed leadership has survived, even as church closings have slowed, by motivating continued activism at the parish and Fr. John's approach to administration.

One of Fr. John's first activities at RP was to introduce to the pastoral council the book *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other and the Spirit of Transformation* (Spellers 2008). As defined by Spellers, radical welcome "means that the community seeks to welcome the voices, presence and power of many groups --- especially those who have been defined as The Other, pushed to the margins, cast out, silenced, and closeted --- in order to help shape the congregation's common life and mission" (2008: 15). As explained by an RP staff member,

> "A radically welcoming Catholic Christian community not only welcomes all to join in worship, but also commits to inclusivity as a basic organizing principle. The parish takes initiative to invite and warmly receive new members and to recognize that the community must then be open to be changed by its new members…we must be willing to advocate for the issues of new members and be open to changes that reflect its increasingly diverse worshippers."

We cite this as evidence that RP understands itself as committed to welcoming new members and working on their behalf. This makes it a fundamentally dynamic place in terms of its answer to the congregational culture question about "who we are" (Becker 1999).

Activists in the diocese framed reconfiguration as failed collaboration between the hierarchy and the laity. RP, on the other hand, is understood by many as a parish where lay constituencies have a strong voice. Several informants, for example, pointed to the membership of the first pastoral council at RP, which was drawn from the multiple communities that become the new parish. A pastoral council is a typical body in a Catholic parish, but it is not always so

explicitly organized according to a fundamental value of the parish. Built into the existing structure of the pastoral council was the recognition that RP was a merged community, and that each community must be represented in the decision making. Deliberately including an equal number of members from the former St. Thomas and St. Martin follows quite directly from the pre-merger steering committee which saw the two communities cooperating, but explicitly requiring that a third of the membership of the council come from 'new' members was an organizational decision to be explicitly collaborative and responsive to wider lay concerns about the relationship between leadership and those in the pews. Similarly, RP was also deliberate in developing a range of liturgical worship styles to be available at its three weekend masses. Each weekend a "traditional," a "gospel," and a "contemporary" mass is celebrated. The traditional mass reflects the worship style that had been common at St. Thomas, the gospel mass carries on a St. Martin tradition, and the contemporary mass is similar in many ways to what had been common at St. Dorothy. Here again we see the parish developing in the spirit of its own merger process and wider concerns about being hospitable to others affected by what many framed as a failed process of reconfiguration.

The public proclamation of the parish as "open and affirming" of LGBT persons and its becoming the home of the local LGBT Catholic community after the closure of its former parish is a further example of RP enacting its mission to be inclusive. During the merger discussions, St. Thomas and St. Martin identified diversity as a key value, but this was primarily oriented toward racial diversity. After RP formed, the pastor invited the local Catholic LGBT group to hold its worship services at the parish. Significantly, within 2 years the LGBT group had disbanded, to a large extent because its members felt welcome at the RP's scheduled services. While a small number of the LGBT group's members wished to keep their group alive, most felt

that they no longer needed their own worship time, but could openly participate in worship and leadership at RP where the pastor and many lay members had worked to integrate the group's members.

Finally, we point to the emergence of an organized effort to voice dissent from Catholic Church policies and political activities. The new group, calling itself Conscientious Catholics, is led by RP parishioners, some of whom had been active in POP. Fr. John was in attendance at their first public protest, which was staged outside of the diocesan cathedral where the local bishop was giving a homily about the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2012 (and continuing) 'Fortnight for Freedom' (USCCB 2013). The Fortnight for Freedom was organized in response to federal health care policies requiring Catholic institutions to provide health coverage for services the Church opposes, with the USCCB dedicating the weeks of June 21st through July 4th to "emphasize both our Christian and American heritage of liberty." According to the USCCB, the Fortnight coincides with the liturgical celebration of several saints martyred for defending their faith "in the face of persecution by political power" (USCCB 2013: Fortnight for Freedom). A letter sent by the local bishop to parishes in the diocese tells readers that the "'Fortnight for Freedom' is in direct response to the federally imposed HHS mandate that will require most Catholic institutions to pay for employee health coverage that includes abortion-inducing drugs, sterilizations and contraception," and closes by asking local parishioners to "join me and fellow Catholics as we pray for a new birth of freedom in our great land" (Diocese of Syracuse 2012).

Representatives of Conscientious Catholics, many of whom were parishioners from Resurrection Parish, staged the protest outside the cathedral in opposition to what they framed as the USCCB's blatant political partisanship. Holding signs reading "The Bishops Don't Speak

For Us," "Free to Disagree," and "Conscience before Obedience," the activists were led by RP's pastor, Fr. John, in prayer and a rendition of God Bless America. The protest was made possible by mobilizing resources from RP, itself a parish that took shape, structurally and culturally, as a response to the diocesan reconfiguration process. Activists from RP understood themselves as a vibrant Catholic parish embracing the spirit of resistance formed via merger and anti-reconfiguration activism. A Catholic parish, framed this way, is a place for the laity to participate in decision making about Church priorities, and to mobilize when dissent is called for.

Conscientious Catholics held a day long workshop at Resurrection Parish in April 2013. Its theme was the failure of Catholic bishops to be true to the promise of Vatican II. Adopting the framing strategy of POP, these activist Catholics believe that many of their leaders value obedience over active lay participation in the life of the Church. The keynote presentation of the workshop began by displaying sections of a quote attributed to Catholic priest and writer Thomas Merton:

> "There can be no question that the great crisis in the Church today is the crisis of authority…On the one hand, love is announced and 'instilled' but, on the other, it is equated with obedience and conformity…Authority becomes calculating and anxious…In so doing it creates opposition."

It is significant that this quote is selected from a passage in which Merton is critiquing the Church as an "impersonal corporation" and as an institution that has "usurped the place of the Church as a community of persons united in love and in Christ" (Padovano 1984: 48). Like Preserve Our Parishes, mobilized against the overt rationalization of diocesan structure and a reconfiguration plan they believed unduly privileged ordained leaders, the workshop drew on the cultural resource of Vatican II to provide a counter frame privileging lay creativity, leadership,

and community. Conscientious Catholics has carried this frame forward, and now feels empowered, from within its parish home at Resurrection Parish with a supportive priest, to offer a more general critique of Catholic authorities.

DISCUSSION

We have argued that opposing frames of leadership and change in the Catholic Church help to explain conflict between the laity and the hierarchy in one Catholic diocese. The framing perspective, when applied to data gathered in interviews with laity and leadership, as well as the pastoral letters, makes evident the degree to which each constituency differently understood a dynamic situation. It helps to explain how the grassroots activism was successful at mobilizing laity across the diocese when the opportunity of the diocese reconfiguration plan began to take effect, and how activism became a central feature of the newly merged parish we studied.

The diocesan frame of reconfiguration held that significant restructuring of the organization was necessary, if unpleasant, because of a priest shortage and demographic shifts that made some parishes unsustainable. This frame placed more emphasis on the health of the overall organization than activists who know the Church primarily through their parishes could easily relate to. The lay frame, on the other hand, contended that parishes can be vibrant without resident priests and that diocesan leaders failed to collaborate with the laity in the spirit of a Church changed by Vatican II. The lay frame focused attention on those things people in the pews knew best, their own life stories and experiences of the sacred. It also turned what the hierarchy understood as a matter of rational management into a debate about legitimate use of Catholic authority.

Our work should be of interest to those who study shifts in Catholic attitudes about authority (see, for example, D'Antonio et al. 2013). As we reflect on the larger sociological

significance of our work, and its gaps, we consider the attitudes of the typical activists we interviewed, and the degree to which they can be considered to be rejecting Catholic authority. Local activists promote what we would call a theology of community, meaning that they understand God to be active whenever 'two or more are gathered,' and hence they see the institutional church as secondary to the substance of being Catholic. Does this attitude about the institutional Catholic Church make them radical?

Throughout our study of reconfiguration in the diocese, one of the things that struck us most was how pious and respectful of their leadership many of the activists were. For example, one of the main activities of POP was a regular 'First Friday' protest outside of the chancery. Symbolically paying homage to a traditional Catholic devotion, protesters gathered on the first Friday of most months to quietly hold signs opposing the reconfiguration process. Their goal was to be present at the chancery - the center of diocesan power, and to clearly offer a variation on a theme of devotion to express dissent. If radical means to break away from existing structures and actions, then this is not a very radical move. In fact, this was a quite pious protest.

Many lay activists believed they were defending the sacred as much they were critiquing diocesan leadership. POP made it very clear that they wanted to cooperate and collaborate with the bishop, and made tactical decisions to signal this intention. For example, once POP representatives were able to schedule a few meetings with the diocese to discuss their opposition to the plan, they put a moratorium on the 'First Friday' protests. Why continue with this potentially disruptive strategy, they reasoned, when diocesan authorities now seemed willing to listen, or at least meet. These were not radical Catholic activists envisioning a new Catholic Church, but rather they were motivated by a desire for a pastoral approach to change they

believed their leadership was failing to provide, and to protect parishes they understood as sacred spaces.

Finally, as research suggests that priests play a significant role in Catholic political action (Smith 2005), we note here that priests offered valuable support to the work of the lay activists. Informants certainly did have negative attitudes about some diocesan priests and other leaders, and these attitudes helped motivate their dissent. However, parishioners at Resurrection Parish, and those from the closed St. Dorothy, nearly uniformly reported very positive attitudes about their priests who they believed were aligned with the laity against the hierarchy. Fr. Paul, the pastor of St. Dorothy – a parish that had a history of frequently organizing to address local, national, and global politics – had a leadership style fit within the parish centered lay frame. His public statements of opposition to the reconfiguration plan certainly helped motivate activists. Fr. John, at Resurrection Parish, was well liked by all those we interviewed, and his leadership was cited by many as integral to the parish's success. It was not uncommon for RP members to report that they had concerns about the future of the parish immediately after the merger of St. Martin and St. Thomas, but that Fr. John's charismatic and caring approach to managing the transition had been invaluable. Like Fr. Paul, he is a priest willing to publicly disagree with the diocese, and as such activists had in him a very powerful resource.

CONCLUSIONS

Our work is at the intersection of research about religious authority and congregational studies. As work by Chaves (2011: 77), religious authority has been in decline across the American religious landscape. This trend is further documented by D'Antonio et al. (2013) in their recent work about American Catholics. The general trend of declining confidence in religious organizations and leaders complicates the story we tell about activists using Vatican II

as an essential element of their counter-frame. While Vatican II was frequently referenced to account for laity demands for a greater voice in the process, it must be understood in the context of the general American trend of moral authority moving from religious institutions to individual consciences. Vatican II, then, becomes a Catholic way of communicating a social trend that is common across many traditions. Scholars of religious change and authority would be wise to consider variability in how these broader trends are differently expressed across traditions. Resistance to authority in an evangelical protestant context, for example, would likely be rooted in the bible, rather than in the history of denominational conferences.

We also note that the story of Resurrection Parish could not be told outside the context of its relationships with other congregations. What it became was a function of the parishes it worked with, and against. The common Catholic process of linking parishes to contend with changing resources would likely benefit by considering parish culture as well as how near parishes are to one another. The two urban parishes, for example, understood their histories as linked because of their location in city neighborhoods, but they also expressed tension with the larger, less racially and economically diverse suburban parish. Catholic dioceses on the verge of new mergers and linkages may find a strategy of matching parishes according to religious styles and local values. Here, the option of personal parishes (Hoegeman and Bruce 2013) might allow for flexible planning when a diocese faces the very real challenges of demographic change and strained resources. Further, our work reminds us that congregational studies should consider the connections and conflicts not only within congregation, but also between local religious communities. As religious communities work to define themselves, they are likely to take into account how they can cooperate with and distinguish themselves from their organizational peers.

Certainly, the narrative of a Catholic parish, in this time of significant organizational change in many parts of the United States, must consider its place in a network of parishes.

Finally, while the activists in the diocese and at Resurrection Parish articulated a protest frame that rallied support and helped to shape what RP became, the role of the charismatic Fr. John cannot be ignored. His leadership and vision for RP was essential in the early success of the newly merged parish. In this way RP is reminiscent of the politically active Chicago parish explored by Cavendish (2001), and it is an open question as to what will become of RP once Fr. John is no longer its pastor. Will the lay-centered spirit of RP last, and will it remain a relatively politicized parish? Given the significant lay involvement in parish planning and activism it is reasonable to assume that the parish could continue to serve as a vocal supporter of urban Catholicism and political dissent. It did, after all, absorb a number of highly engaged members from the diocese's former 'politically progressive' parish, St. Dorothy. Nonetheless, it exists in an ever-changing environment, and only recently the diocese has begun another round of discussion of parish linkages and possible mergers. Were RP to encounter another merger or linkage, or to lose its pastor who so effectively engages the laity to work on behalf of the parish and is very willing to critique his local leadership, its future could be very different.

While this paper has been an exploration of contention over changes in one diocese, and not meant as a full explanation of patterns in the causes and consequences of diocesan reconfiguration, lay activists have organized in many dioceses to resist official plans. Do activists in these dioceses use the symbol of Vatican II in a similar fashion? Do they draw on other aspects of Catholic Social Teaching or history, or do they use resources outside the Catholic tradition to mobilize support? How do bishops and pastors in other dioceses understand parish life and its relationship to the priest shortage and other resource challenges? Certainly

these are questions for future research about Catholic change, in particular, and American religious change more generally.

Notes

1. All names of organizations, parishes, and people are changed for the sake of informant confidentiality.

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