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Beyond Parochialism Roman Catholic Parishes Re-Discovering Catholicity

Kees de Groot

Judging by the attention given by both the media and science to religious themes, religion seems to be back on form in the Netherlands. "God lives" was the title of a feature about the "return of religion" after the "God is dead" age (*Vrij Nederland*, 17 April 2003). A few years earlier, in 1997 the Dutch book week was entitled "My God". This event was regarded as a turning point in the recognition of the role of religion in Dutch society. Appreciation of the Roman Catholic tradition in particular seemed to be growing, as was indicated by journalist Monic Slingerland's and writers Willem Jan Otten and Vonne van der Meer's publicly recognized interest in Catholicism (Broers e.a. 2000).

The challenge of the global persistence of religion

A great future lies ahead for the religious past.¹ Firstly, the importance of religion in the public domain is increasing in some countries. Ties with a nation or a particular population often rely on a religious background. After all, religion gives people the strength to endure, to develop, or to resist. There has been a growth in organized religion such as Islam and Catholicism in various modernizing societies in Africa and Asia. With migration, this is more or less reflected in western societies. Minority religions and migrant parishes are, therefore, growing in the Netherlands as well.

Secondly, people's individual religious interest is anything but dying, as has been demonstrated even in highly secularized societies like the Dutch one. People still participate in rites of passage and, to a somewhat lesser extent than before, imagine a life before this one and hereafter, believe in miracles, and pray – even if they are of the younger generation, (Becker & De Wit 2000, 40-41; Kregting & Sanders 2003). Is the hunger for religiosity, spirituality, and rituals growing in Dutch society? This is a development that cannot be confirmed. What can be confirmed is the increase in public interest in general, while at the same time the character of choice dominates. The phrase "save religion for the church" no longer applies. Religion is becoming freely available. People are making their own choices from the range of religious traditions available, and following trends but not necessarily taking part. Religious themes used in films,

1 See www.nwo.nl/future for the brochure of the vast government-financed study programme "The future of the religious past".

television commercials, computer games, and music show that inspiration is drawn from the sizeable reservoir of religious narratives, symbols, and rituals, in short, from the tremendous cultural inheritance left by religious traditions. The Catholic tradition, with its visual and ritual elements, is appreciated widely in this respect.

Last but not least, important minorities are very much involved in so-called committed communities. A characteristic of these communities is that people choose to take part in them. They are not usually born into them. These home communities, non-denominational churches, and Small Christian Communities are associated with a whole range of new religious movements. Only a small part of church leavers, however, join for evangelical, charismatic, and neo-Catholic groups, and these groups do not have great appeal amongst the non-Christian Dutch population.

It is clear that, so far, regular Roman Catholic parishes in the Netherlands have not taken advantage of the global religious persistence. Other mainline Christian churches in Dutch society are not doing much better, as has been recorded extensively by the Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands (Becker & De Wit 2000) and the long-term study "Social-cultural developments in the Netherlands" (Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers 2001). The recent church merger that resulted in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands was also a downsizing operation. The future of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands, however, is especially bleak. Amongst the younger generation (the under 30s, the so-called Generation Y), the proportion of Catholics has decreased dramatically. Only 13 percent affirm that they belong to a denomination, namely the Roman Catholic Church, compared with 25 percent of the Generation X (30-40) (Kregting & Sanders 2003, 6). The number of Roman Catholics is set to fall dramatically as their average age increases. The church simply fails to recruit the younger generation.

The findings of a recent poll suggest that the overall image of the Roman Catholic Church is negative.² According to the European Values Study, the Dutch level of trust in churches is the lowest in Europe, after that of the Czech Republic. In the Netherlands, the churches are considered the institutions that are the least trustworthy (Halman & Abela 2001). In this secularized culture, where religious participation is increasingly a matter of choice, Dutch parishes are struggling to find their way. What strategic options do they have at their disposal and what choices do they actually make? Research carried out by the Tilburg Faculty of Theology in cooperation with the Institute for Applied Research on Religion (KASKI) of the University of Nijmegen indicates that they are taking a route that deserves special attention. It is a different route from that of the congregational polity that dominates scholarly literature.

2 Image poll by Bureau Intomart under the authority of the television magazine of the Catholic Broadcasting Association (*Studio KRO-Magazine*, 28 June 2003).

1. From community to organization

For a period of nearly a century, church participation was self-evident among Dutch Catholics. Being part of the Catholic subculture meant participating in the local parish. Within this subculture, the Catholic Church held a religious monopoly. The restoration of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands since the second half of the nineteenth century had been successful to the extent that community and parish could be regarded as identical.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the Dutch religious situation has been characterized by two developments: the declining power of the established religious regimes and the modest persistence of individual religious (not necessarily Christian) beliefs, experiences, and practices (Becker & De Wit 2000). Cross-national surveys, such as the European (and World) Values Study (Verweij 1998; Halman & Riis 1999) and the International Social Survey Program (Pollack 2003), indicate that the Dutch religious profile can be positioned between that of the Scandinavian countries, on the one hand, and former East Germany and the Czech Republic, on the other. Church adherence is low; Christian beliefs are not popular; relatively few people consider themselves religious; and non-Christian beliefs such as in reincarnation, are not as popular in the Netherlands as they are in the USA, Great Britain, and France. Most people do not consider themselves members of a church, but neither do they consider themselves completely irreligious (Denz 2000). This context seems to be providing an impetus for the renewal of church organization.

An organizational perspective

In the present situation, it is useful to take an organizational perspective on the Roman Catholic Church (cf. Demerath *et al.* 1998). The Roman Catholic Church is a social unit that was established for an explicit purpose: to spread the Word and to provide the sacraments mediated by the ministry. This does not imply, however, that the parish can be rightly considered an organization on its own. A parish is not an independent congregation, but a subdivision of a larger organization. The world's oldest multinational may be considered a *concern* (Fleck & Dyma 2002). This concern consists of dioceses, led by bishops who have the authority to manage affairs in their own domain, within canonical boundaries. A diocese usually consists of parishes. In the Netherlands, parishes are under the collegiate administration of a parish priest and a parish council. The parish priest may cooperate with one or more professional lay ministers ("pastoral workers"). They see pastoral policy as their common concern; incidentally, this collective responsibility is officially confirmed.

The parish council consists of parishioners appointed by the bishop and is chaired (since 1983) by the parish priest. This council is responsible for the management of the parish and also advises on pastoral matters. A separate body may exist to perform the latter task: the "parish assembly" or the "pastoral

group". Often, these lay bodies have an important say in the policy of the parish, if only because, nowadays, one man is usually the parish priest of several parishes. Much pastoral work is carried out and coordinated by volunteers, comparable with the way reformed churches are run. In this way, the earlier tendency to regard the church as primarily consisting of clerics is counteracted.

Although the parish may *also* be formally considered the work area of a bishop's division manager, it makes sense to regard the parish as a relatively autonomous organization within a larger concern. This local organization is at least partially led by laypersons.

The ambivalence of membership

In relation to any formal organization, four basic categories of persons can be distinguished: the managers of the organization, the "ordinary" members, the public-in-contact, for example, the clients, and the public-at-large: the society in which the organization operates (Blau & Scott 1963).

The management of the parish is controlled by the parish priest and the parish council. But who are the members? All those who are baptized as Catholics are *formally* part of this church. When asked in a single phrase to *which* denomination they belonged, including the option "none", virtually all nominal Catholics identified themselves as such. Not all, however, considered themselves church members. When asked, "Do you consider yourself to belong to a church?" only 72 percent gave an affirmative answer: "Yes" "Which church?" "The Roman-Catholic Church". These enduring differences – in various surveys – between the results of these two presentations of the question were scrutinized. The findings of this secondary analysis (Becker 2003) indicated that these differences are caused by a fairly distinct category of respondents who believe in God or a higher power, but keep the church and its moral authority at a distance. Thus, 27 percent of Catholics are willing to confess their religion, whereas they also express their feeling that they do not belong to this church, or any other church.

I take this as evidence for my thesis that a considerable proportion of Dutch Catholics probably do not regard themselves as members of the Roman Catholic Church, but as part of the public it delivers services to. A quarter of all so-called inconsistent respondents, for example, attended church more than once a year. The others claimed that they never attend services. However, the Catholics among them were at least baptized in this church. They may still attend weddings, funerals, and Christmas services. They may have been married there, and their relatives will probably ask the church to provide a funeral service when their time comes.

People appear to have varying relationships with the parish. A majority of the parishioners by ascription prefer to participate to a limited degree, be it for their whole lives, or only during a certain phase. Sometimes they need the church to pray, to commemorate, or to celebrate, or to be part of a larger com-

munity. Many parishioners do not see themselves as members of a congregation, but as the potential clients of a service provided, or even, more generally, as the supporters of an institution that provides services that are regarded as important by society at large. Only a minority is involved more intensely.

The parish as a mixed type

Applying the *cui bono* (who is the prime beneficiary?) criterion, Blau & Scott (1963: 42-45) distinguished four types of organization. In a *business concern*, such as a firm or a private army, the power, or the revenues, of the top of the organization is primary. In a *mutual benefit organization*, such as an interest group or a society of friends, the interests of the members are central. In a *service organization*, such as hospitals and schools, the public-in-contact is dominant. In a *commonweal organization*, such as public institutions, the public-at-large dominates.

All four types exist in the religious field. A shrine that is exploited by a priest is an example of a business concern; a society of believers (Blau & Scott already mentioned “religious sects”) is an example of a mutual benefit association; churches that are used incidentally by a large public for services and ceremonies are service organizations; state churches are religious commonweal organizations.

What type of organization is the contemporary Dutch Roman Catholic parish? The parish is designed to preach the gospel to the faithful and to administer the sacraments, especially confession and the Eucharist. Following the Second Vatican Council, the parish is also considered instrumental for the faithful in fulfilling their mission in the world. In this way, a key notion of the Council is translated to the parish level: the faithful are not only receivers of sacraments, but also part of the people of God (*Lumen Gentium* 9-17). It is intended that the parish gathers the faithful, in particular in the celebration of the Eucharist, and empowers them to do their Christian duties in the world.

The contemporary Dutch parish is a mixed type: part mutual benefit, part service (De Groot 2001; 2004). This is shown by the divergent ways in which the key word *communio* is used. The post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church values “the community of the faithful” (*communio fidelium*) as well as “the participation of individuals in the life of the triune God” (Walter Kasper), mediated by the word and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist (*communio sanctorum*). In the former sense of *communio*, the community consists of members belonging to the association; in the latter, community is experienced (as in Victor Turner’s *communitas*) by persons taking part in a collective ritual that visualizes, enacts, and fosters a common faith. In this case, the Roman Catholic Church may function as an institution providing a service to those who want to live as Christians.

Each organization type has its structural strengths and weaknesses. To the extent that a parish operates as a *mutual benefit association*, its members, such

as volunteers and regular participants, dominate the organization. The main aim is to serve the interests of the members. Mutual support is encouraged; client behavior is discouraged. It is the organization's intention that those who are interested (the served public) become participating members.

A typical strength of the parish that positions itself as a faith community is that it provides the parishioners with the experience of being part of a Christian community of committed believers who support each other. Its typical weakness is its closure towards non-believers and the exclusion of apostates. In the Roman Catholic Church, it is held that the heretic and the sinner excommunicate themselves. This conforms to the image of a religious group that seeks to safeguard its identity.

To the extent that a parish operates as (a division of) a *service organization*, the public-in-contact, or more specifically, the interests of the served public, dominate the organization. Client behavior is expected. The parish views itself as offering religious services, comparable to a mental health institute offering psychological services. As in other so-called "people processing organizations", clients are only part of the organization during the service delivery. A typical weakness is the asymmetrical relationship between church attendants and pastors. Nevertheless, care for the faithful is central in a parish that functions as a service organization, unlike in a church that operates as a business concern. The parish that positions itself as a service organization may assure the accessibility of the Christian tradition, even to those who are not willing to become members of a specific society – which can be considered a strength.

2. The challenge to be accessible and Christian

In a context where there is continuing public interest in rituals and spirituality, and a continuing negative attitude towards the institutional Roman Catholic Church, parishes are faced with the challenge of combining the best of both worlds. A survey, in which questioning parish councils and assemblies were asked about the strategic choices they make in positioning their parishes, indicated that parish councils see themselves as faced with two demands.³

The first demand is to be an accessible community for religious affairs. One can come and go in the community as one likes, according to one's personal needs. This community has a Christian identity, but is open to everyone. We ranked parishes on a scale we called *perceived accessibility*, varying from "ap-

³ This section is based on De Groot & Kregting 2004. The survey was carried out in spring 2003 in cooperation with the Institute for Applied Research on Religion (KASKI) of the University of Nijmegen. The questionnaire contained 74 statements and was mailed to a representative sample of parishes in all seven Dutch dioceses. In the accompanying letter, we requested that a few members of the parish council or assembly collectively fill in the questionnaire about the positioning of the parish. After receiving one follow-up letter, 103 parishes responded (47.9 %), which is satisfactory for a postal survey. Factor analysis was carried out by Joris Kregting.

plies strongly" to "does not apply (or hardly)". The five strongest items composing this scale characterize the basic idea of a parish that these councils disagreed upon: "Our parish offers something to hold on to, comfort, and a momentary sense of solidarity"; "Our parish wishes to respond to the interest in spirituality"; "We try to support new forms of religious life"; "Our outreach program supports all kinds of people"; and "What we offer connects to the questions ordinary people have about the meaning of their lives, especially when they're experiencing important life events".⁴ Thus, parish councils differ in their perceptions of the accessibility of their parishes. Does the parish offer spirituality, support, and programs for initiation rites? Does it operate in a style that responds to the interests of the people? Does it meet the needs of all kinds of people, including incidental visitors, who believe there is "something beyond"?

The second demand is to be a community that strongly stresses its distinctive Christian features. This community expects parishioners to have a real religious interest and to be prepared to participate. The parish expresses strong ideas about its mission. Commitment to the Christian tradition is central. We ranked parishes on a scale we called *Christian profile*. Items that determined this scale were: "When you listen well, you'll find that people have a longing for God"; "Nowadays, more than ever, a deep religious faith is required"; and "Jesus Christ should be central in every parish activity". Favorite mottos were: "Unless one is born anew, one cannot see the kingdom of God" and "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest".⁵ Parish councils tended to differ in their appreciation of such a Christian identity. Is it really our mission to be a *Christian faith* community? Do we expect people to relate to that seriously and to participate actively?

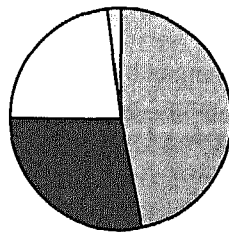
Parishes are challenged, on the one hand, to address the (implicit) religious needs of the general public (including secularized Catholics) at the risk of losing their specifically Christian identity. On the other, parishes are called on to stress their distinctive features, at the risk of losing contact with all those who are baptized in this church and who do not identify completely with the Roman Catholic Church or feel the need to participate frequently. The former strategy may end in a church that vanishes; the latter in a church that is reduced to a sect.

Parishes are experiencing the strategic challenge of holding on to a Christian profile while trying to stay in contact with the public. We found three ways of dealing with this dilemma; we found that a fourth theoretical possibility hardly exists in reality.

4 Factor loadings varied from 0.60 to 0.70. The remaining 16 statements had factor loadings > 0.45.

5 Factor loadings varied from 0.60 to 0.69. The remaining 8 statements had factor loadings > 0.45. These two components explained 36.2 % of the total variance.

Parish types



- open parish (47%)
- inviting parish (28%)
- parochial parish (23%)
- exclusive parish (2%)

Parochial

The *parochial parish* combines low accessibility with a weak Christian profile. This accounts for almost a quarter of Dutch parishes. A person cannot easily start to participate in this parish. Nor is it clear what to expect or easy to know what is expected. In a way, this is typical of a *community* as described by Ferdinand Tönnies. A community is simply there (*zuhanden*) (Bauman 2001, 7-20). It was there before and is meant to endure. One does not “choose” to participate; one is born into a parish. As soon as one starts to think about the identity of a community, it stops being a community. Being part of a community speaks for itself.

This parish does not “offer” services or try to attract “members”. This parish does not have an “identity profile” or a mission statement. This parish simply *is*. Sympathetic as this Heideggerian attitude may be, this is probably the type of parish that gave the adjective “parochial” its meaning. According to Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987), “People who are *parochial* think only about their own local affairs and interests.”

In contemporary Dutch society, the parochial parish combines the worst of both worlds. With no reconstruction of the organization, the parish continues to rely on the loyal participation of the faithful. As long as there is a local Catholic subculture, and competition from sports clubs and cultural activities is weak, these parishes may survive. These are probably not vital parishes, and their future is insecure. In this case, models of cooperation and mergers only conceal the fact that there is no future in their marginal position.

Open

The *open parish* is accessible, or supposedly so, and does not have a strong Christian profile. This accounts for almost half of Dutch parishes. This type fits in well with modern consumerism. Any person looking for rituals, spirituality, or simply a sense of belonging is welcome. It is the aim of the parish to tune in with the common vague notion that there is “something out there”. Prayer, the

bible, the sacraments, and the Christian tradition are held as important. However, sensitivity to what is offensive in individualized, pluralized, and secularized Dutch society is high. The door is open. All persons are allowed to decide for themselves to what extent they will participate in or identify with the Roman Catholic Church.

The open parish deals with the dilemma by giving priority to the accessibility of the parish. Such parishes may attract people with lively celebrations, an active social network, and a keen sense of contemporary religious consciousness. In villages and parts of towns where the Catholic parish is (still) strongly connected with the local community, this may be a successful way of operating. The strength of such parishes lies in the commitment of the volunteering parishioners. Their main concern is recruiting volunteers from the new generation for new activities.

Inviting

The *inviting parish* combines high accessibility with a strong Christian profile. More than a quarter of Dutch parishes seek to combine the best of both worlds. Any person, whether highly motivated or not, who is searching for “something more” is welcome, but the parish organization itself is characterized by a clearly identifiable Christian identity. The Catholic notion of a “natural longing for God” is clearly present. The parish is there to cultivate this longing and shape it into a truly Christian faith. This is, in the end, “where it’s at”. It is not considered a problem that people behave as clients; they are invited to become confessing and practicing Christians.

The inviting parish aims to remain open without forsaking its identity. It has a strong theological motivation to be accessible. This position is defended by authors who believe there is a future for a church which cares for its spiritual traditions and offers elements of these traditions to the faithful and non-believers, those of other faiths, ex-believers, and believers-to-be (cf. Hellemans, Putman & Wissink 2003). Theological and management skills are required to put this into practice. If these are present, this strategy may work successfully.

Exclusive

A fourth possibility is the combination of a strong Christian profile with low accessibility. This *exclusive parish* would have a discernable identity; it would presuppose strong commitment and discourage a “shopping” mentality. This parish would be less inclined to respond to a general wish for spirituality and rituals, and would bring out a clear Christian message instead. Such a parish is not an institute for the delivery of “spiritual” services. One is only welcome if one is willing to become a committed Christian. Our parish is the way to God.

This position, however, was virtually absent in our sample. Only two parishes consistently favored the items of the Christian profile and rejected the

items of “perceived accessibility”. All parishes that perceived themselves as having a strong Christian identity also thought of themselves as welcoming all kinds of “seekers” and “shoppers”.

3. Discussion

In the United States, Nancy Ammerman and her research team (1997) provided insight into the importance of churches, congregations, and parishes for modern civil society. From a European perspective, it is striking that the overall term she used was congregation. This is a common term in the American context, but it has a specific meaning in ecclesiology. Congregationalism, as opposed to presbyterian and episcopal church orders, locates the power of the church in the local gathering, a position shared by Baptists, some Pentecostals and Congregationalists of Calvinist origin (Lossky *et al.* 2002). This specific meaning resonates in the distinction Ammerman makes between congregations with a congregational polity and congregations following a hierarchical polity. What is increasingly common, however, to all these congregations is that people *choose* to join them and that they are places of *belonging* (Ammerman *et al.* 1997, 354, 362).

The American bias of congregational studies

Congregational studies, such as the U.S. Congregational Life Survey,⁶ Faith Communities Today (FACT),⁷ and the National Church Life Surveys,⁸ reflect a similar perspective on the church as an organization. Churches are regarded as voluntary associations that are potential options for those seeking to participate. One chooses to belong. Accordingly, churches are challenged to act as competing firms on a religious market (Stark & Finke 2000).

This fits in with a context where it is normal to be a religious person and a matter of choice to *which* congregation one belongs. Almost half of all Americans (40 percent) declare that they attend church *every week*. Observations of actual church attendance indicate that those interviewed probably overestimated their reported church attendance, nevertheless, this exceeds almost all European figures and the over-reporting itself indicates the social standard of a churchgoing citizen (Davie 2002, 28).

It has been noticed that Roman Catholic parishes, even in the United States, do not act according to the congregational scheme. Catholics are not required to participate in their parishes to the same extent as Protestants are. It is this Catholic exception within the American context that provides the link with the Dutch situation. In this study, I demonstrated that there are other strategic

6 www.uscongregations.com.

7 www.fact.hartsem.edu.

8 www.ncls.org.au.

choices for Roman Catholic parishes than that of the recruiting congregation. Their effectiveness remains to be seen.

A European model?

A considerable portion of Roman Catholic parishes can still be characterized as parochial in the sense that they have neither a strong Christian profile, nor a service orientation. There are signs, however, of attempts to get beyond parochialism. The direction in which these attempts are going is different from that of the religious congregation that rewards membership. The positioning of the majority of Dutch parishes reflects an organizational orientation that resembles that of the service institution. The quality most valued is accessibility. This can be regarded as a strength of the service orientation. Parishes are willing to respond to the desires of those who do not consider themselves devout Catholics, but nevertheless require spiritual, religious and ceremonial services from the institute.

Only one third of these parishes (a quarter of all parishes) combine this attitude with a strong view of their Christian profile, which may be considered a strength of the mutual benefit organization. It is a precarious situation that the majority of Dutch parishes do not seem to have a concept of identity. Parishes that are willing to be open without having a clear concept of what they have to offer will have difficulties in reaching their audience with their specific services. Only as long as competition is absent, will there be a market for their services. The challenge for these parishes is to develop a theological motivation for their service orientation, and a perception of what the "real" interests of the public are.

In this respect, the Dutch Catholic parishes may reflect a European trend in the modernization of religion (cf. Davie 2002). Whereas the results of U.S. congregational studies show the dominance of the mutual benefit organization, the results of this study show the dominance of the service organization. The distinction made by Max Weber between the model of the church, which prevails in Europe, and the sect, which prevails in the United States, may still be useful (Weber 1984). Unlike the sect, the church acts as though it controls the access to the eternal goods of salvation, which are presented to each individual. Normally, one does not join this church voluntarily as one joins a club or society. One is "born into it". The non-religiously qualified and the ungodly alike are subjected to its discipline (Weber 1976, 692-693). This typology is reflected in the present discussion in both practical theology and sociology of religion as the distinction between the service institution (Hellemans, Putman & Wissink 2003) and the exclusive firm (Sengers 2004). There is, however, an important difference that raises the question, can the service orientation of the church remain when its power has dwindled?

The catholic imperative

Peter Berger (1980) coined a fitting term for the social obligation in modernizing societies to make personal choices with regard to religion: the heretical imperative. There are, however, several types of choices. One option is to join a certain congregation; another is to receive a religious service. The American situation reflects a congregational tendency, even with regard to Catholic parishes. One could call this the protestant imperative. The Dutch-European situation reflects a tendency to regard the church as public utility. One could call this the catholic imperative.

In a stronger sense, this attitude reflects a catholic notion. Catholicity is one of the ecclesial notions (*notae ecclesiae*) that are summarized in the creedal expression of the *unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*. The notion of catholicity expresses the extent to which the church is accessible to the whole of God's people. Closely related to this notion is the positive attitude towards the natural longing for God. This is the belief that an orientation towards God is already present in human beings. God is present in creation, and so He is, more or less hidden, in authentic human experiences. The only task of the church is to cultivate and direct this longing in the right direction, namely, in the direction of a church that continues the life and work of Jesus Christ. Central to its mission, therefore, is to give access to the word of God and the sacraments. Dutch parishes are challenged to fulfill this mission in a culture where even Catholics tend to keep the church-as-an-institute at a distance.

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