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What is This?

Kees DE GROOT, Joris KREGTING and Erik BORGMAN

The Positioning of the Parish in a Context of Individualization

Now that religious participation largely depends on individual choice, existing religious congregations find themselves confronted with the challenge of organizational renewal. Both sociological and theological authors disagree on two strategies as successful ways of coping with this new "market situation". The first strategy is that of the service institution; the second, that of the exclusive firm. We conducted a survey among parish councils in the Netherlands regarding the positioning of Roman Catholic parishes in this respect. Factor analysis shows that these parishes do not differentiate along these lines. They do differentiate, however, on the factors of "perceived accessibility" and "Christian profile". Thus, three parish types could be discerned: the open parish, the inviting parish and the "parochial" parish. These types reflect different ways of coping with the strategic challenge parishes are faced with: holding on to a Christian profile, while trying to stay in contact with the public.

Key words: *Catholicism · Christian profile · church policy · individualization · Netherlands · organizational renewal · religious market*

Le contexte de l'individualisation des choix religieux oblige les paroisses à une remise en question de leur positionnement. Du côté des sociologues et des théologiens, le débat est analogue et porte sur l'efficacité des stratégies paroissiales. Mais les premiers favorisent la stratégie de l'organisation de services religieux, tandis que les autres celle de la "firme exclusive". Or, l'analyse d'une enquête parmi les paroisses catholiques aux Pays-Bas montre que les paroisses ne suivent pas cette ligne de partage. Confrontées au dilemme de choisir entre accessibilité et profil chrétien, les paroisses adoptent en fait une des trois positions suivantes: la paroisse publique, la paroisse accueillante et la paroisse "à l'esprit de clocher".

Mots-clés: *catholicisme · christianisme · individualisme · marché religieux · Pays-Bas · politique ecclésiale · renouveau organisationnel*

Since Vatican II, it has become common usage to refer to the parish as a community. In fact, the Catholic parish cannot be regarded sociologically as a community, i.e. an enduring human figuration characterized by shared beliefs and values, frequent interaction, and the provision of reciprocal social support and mutual aid. The variations in beliefs and values among

parishioners are considerable, parishes are simply too large for frequent interaction other than among a small minority, and little support is provided to members in need (see Hornsby-Smith, 1989: 66–94).

For almost half a century, it has increasingly been a matter of choice whether and to what extent individuals participate. Our suggestion is that, in this respect, it is more adequate and useful to consider the parish as an organization. This perspective makes it possible to address the issue of how parishes, as organizations, are dealing with a social environment in which people do not regard their participation as self-evident. What kind of organizational structure are these parishes developing? Because we do not know how existing parishes see themselves in this respect, the main question addressed in the present study is: what is the perception that parishes have of themselves as organizations?

In this regard the case of the Netherlands is interesting. The Dutch religious situation is characterized by two developments: declining power of the established religious regimes and modest persistence of individual religious (not necessarily Christian) beliefs, experiences, and practices (Becker and De Wit, 2000). Cross-national surveys 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 (see, for example, EVS-data [Denz, 2000] and ISSP-data [Pollack, 2003]). Church adherence is low; Christian beliefs are not very popular; relatively few people consider themselves to be religious; and non-Christian items such as reincarnation are not as popular in the Netherlands as they are in the USA, Great Britain, or France. Most people do not consider themselves members of a church, yet neither do they consider themselves as completely irreligious. This context seems to be providing an impetus for renewal of church organization.

We have observed a similar disagreement, within both scholarly literature and circles of church policy, concerning the strategy to be used to produce a lively church in a context of pluralization and individualization. This context is also called a market situation. On the one hand, one can discern the strategy of the plural church or service institute (e.g. Steinkamp, 1997; de Hart, 1999; Hellemans, 1999), on the other, the strategy of the strict church or exclusive firm (e.g. Stark and Finke, 2000).

The first approach argues that since modern individuals behave as consumers, churches should explore the (often implicit) religiosity of the people (Hellemans et al., 2003) and offer the richness of the Christian tradition, its rituals and wisdom in a way that is accessible to these shopping individuals. This view may result in a plea for a commodification of the Christian tradition (Ward, 2002). According to these authors, the church can benefit from transforming itself into a religious service institute. Moreover, they can argue that, for quite a number of people, it is probably already operating as such.

The second approach argues that in a context of pluralism, an exclusivist strategy is the road to success. Propositions of the ''new paradigm'' are that a religious organization has to have a discernible identity; that there should be a reward for membership; and that it should cost individuals something to

participate, provided they perceive benefits that exceed the efforts they make. Authors advocating rational choice theory claim that church-to-sect movements are taking place, for instance, in the Roman Catholic Church, and that this is a better strategy for achieving vitality than a trend towards liberalism (Sengers, 2004).

Both approaches make a similar distinction between service institution and exclusive firm. They only differ in terms of appreciation of the two options. "Liberal" authors prefer the church to continue to be relevant for those who do not want to invest much in their commitment to the church; their opponents indicate that only strict churches are strong.

The issue that concerns us here is not the question "who is right?", but a more modest, descriptive, question: do existing parishes define themselves along these lines? And if so: which types prevail and in what measure? If not: is it possible to discern other patterns? Our aim, therefore, is to find out how parishes cope with the problems (or challenges) they are faced with. Additionally, we will reflect upon the perspectives these strategies have, the historical background of our findings, and opportunities for further research.

An Organizational Perspective on the Parish

First, however, we have to clarify our organizational perspective. Can a parish rightly be considered an organization? We agree with several authors that an organizational perspective on the church is useful (Demerath et al., 1998). The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is a social unit that was established for an explicit purpose: to spread the Word and to provide the sacraments mediated by the ministry. The world's oldest multinational may be considered a *concern* (Bernts, 2003). This concern consists of dioceses, led by bishops who have the authority to manage affairs in their own domain, within canonical boundaries. Usually, a diocese 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"). Usually, they will 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 has been chaired since 1983 by the parish priest. This council is responsible for the management of the parish and advises on pastoral matters as well. A distinctive body may exist to perform the latter task: the parish assembly or the pastoral group. Very 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 for several parishes. A great deal of pastoral work is carried out and coordinated by volunteers, comparable with the way reformed churches are run.

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

In order to distinguish patterns in the various ways parishes respond to the situation they are facing, we formulated a series of statements. As a guide to formulating statements for the two distinctive types (exclusive firm and service institute), we made use of the classical typology of Peter Blau and Richard Scott (1963). As in relation to any formal organization, four basic categories of persons can be distinguished: (1) those who consider themselves, and are generally considered, members, i.e. parishioners; (2) the managers of the organization: parish priest and council; (3) the public-in-contact: visitors, e.g. those who attend services at Christmas, but do not consider themselves church members; and (4) the general public: the members of the (local) society in which the parish operates.

Applying the *cui bono* (who is the prime beneficiary?) criterion, Blau and Scott (1963: 42–45) distinguish four types of organization: (1) mutual benefit associations; (2) business concerns; (3) service organizations; and (4) commonweal organizations. In the Dutch, plural, context, the parish is probably a mixed type—part mutual benefit, part service—since the parish organization has a mission for all baptized people, whether or not they are practising Catholics. However, since we are searching for differentiation, we make a distinction between the two types. This enables us to discern different accents in the way parishes approach their environment.

To the extent that a parish operates as a *mutual benefit association*, the members, that is, the volunteers and the regular participants, dominate the organization.[1] The main issue then is to serve the interests of the members. Mutual support is encouraged; consuming behaviour is discouraged. It is the organization's intention that those who are interested (the public that is served) become participating members.

To the extent that a parish operates as a *service organization*, the public-in-contact, more specifically, the interest of the served public, dominates the organization. Consuming behaviour is expected. This parish conceives of itself as offering religious services, comparable to a mental health institute offering psychological services.

Research and Results

Against this theoretical background, more fully presented by de Groot (2001), we constructed a questionnaire containing 74 statements regarding the positioning of the parish.[2] In spring 2003, the questionnaire was mailed to a representative sample of 215 parishes, originating from all seven Dutch dioceses. In the accompanying letter we requested that a few members of the parish council or assembly collectively fill in this questionnaire about the positioning of the parish.[3] This request was explicitly addressed to them since we expected them to have insight into the way the parish operates. After one follow-up letter, 103 parishes responded (47.9 percent), which is satisfactory for a postal survey.

First, we carried out a confirmatory factor analysis. This showed that the analytical dimensions could not be discerned in the empirical data. Parishes

with high scores on "mutual benefit" items have high scores on "service" items as well. Our next question was: but how can parishes be differentiated? Is a useful classification possible, using our analytical framework?

Although the variation among the parishes is low, we managed to successfully carry out an exploratory factor analysis (with Varimax rotation), resulting in two components with sufficiently high factor loadings (> 0.45), double factor loadings excluded. The components are highly reliable; both the first, including 21 statements, which we called "perceived accessibility" ($\alpha = 0.90$) and the second, including 13 statements, which we called "Christian profile" ($\alpha = 0.83$). These two components explain 36.2 percent of the total variance.

The first factor (Table 1) measures the extent to which the respondents recognized their parish in the following profile: an accessible community for religious affairs. One can come and go as one likes, according to one's personal need. This community has a Christian identity and is open to everyone. Keyword: *accessibility*. The items this factor is composed of characterize what the parish has to offer, the style in which it operates, and the kind of people they want to serve.

TABLE 1
Dimension: perceived accessibility

Offering:
- Something to hold on to, comfort, a momentary sense of solidarity
- Spirituality
- Religiosity
- Support
- Initiation
- A home

Style:
- Presenting
- Meet the need
- Comfortable
- Accompany
- Embedding

For whom?
- All kinds of people
- Seekers
- Consumers
- Incidental visitors

What is their motivation?
- There's something beyond
- Questions about life and its meaning
- Vague notion of belief
- Search for spirituality

TABLE 2
Dimension: Christian profile

Mission:
- Agreement with biblical mottos
- Jesus Christ fundamental
- Deep religious faith
- Community building

Expectations:
- Active participation (services, Bible study, prayer groups)
- Interest in and acquaintance with Christian tradition
- Determination to be a Christian
- A wish for the ''hard stuff'', not for pious nonsense

Attitude:
- ''When you listen well, you'll find that people have a longing for God''

The second factor (Table 2) measures the extent to which a parish is recognized in the following profile: a community that strongly stresses its distinctive Christian features. It is expected that parishioners have a real religious interest and are prepared to participate. The parish expresses strong ideas about its mission. Commitment to the Christian tradition is central. Keyword: *Christian profile*. The component items address the mission of the parish and the underlying expectations of the people who are interested.

Although these factors differ from the original analytical constructs, it is tempting to recognize the traits of the ''service institute'' and the ''exclusive firm'', respectively. However, there is a snag in it somewhere.

Some 75 percent of the parishes share the first profile. They recognize themselves in the image of a Christian community that is accessible to anyone with religious needs. A smaller category (30 percent) identifies with a stronger Christian profile. These parishes demand active participation and strong motivation.

Our next step was to investigate the correlation between these two scales. If they represented the ''service institute'' and the ''exclusive firm'', there would, of course, be a negative correlation. A high score on ''Christian profile'' would correspond to a low score on ''perceived accessibility''.[4]

The distribution of the cases in Table 3 is not as expected. What is interesting is the almost empty upper right-hand cell. Hardly any parish (only two) consistently favoured the items relating to the ''exclusive firm'' and rejected the items relating to the ''service institution''. Surprisingly, considering the apparent theoretical contradictions, the factor ''Christian profile'' is often combined with the factor ''accessibility'' (28%). This result provides an interesting comment on the debate between the proponents of the exclusive firm and the proponents of the service institution. In the next section, we will explore what this teaches us about the various ways in which parishes react as organizations.

TABLE 3
Correlation between "perceived accessibility" and "Christian profile" (%)

	Christian profile		
	Low	High	Total (*n*)
Perceived accessibility			
Low			25
	23	2	(23)
High			75
	47	28	(67)
Total (*n*)	70 (63)	30 (27)	100 (90)

For now, comparing the (analytical) typology with our (empirical) classification, we may conclude:

1. Nearly half of all parishes (the largest category) perceive themselves as service institutions, while lacking a strong identity.
2. There is a category of parishes combining a service orientation and a strong identity
3. There is a category rejecting both options
4. There is no category that identifies completely with the concept of the exclusive firm.

Interpretation

Our question was: do members of some Dutch parish councils identify their parish as an exclusive firm, while members of other parish councils identify their parish as a service institution? Or is there another pattern? The first answer must be negative. Most parishes see themselves as "open communities". Parishes do not define themselves as exclusive firms. Yet, the analytical distinction reveals a slightly different pattern. Figure 1 gives a graphic representation of the data in Table 3.

We will make some explanatory remarks on the three major types: the open parish, the inviting parish, and the parochial parish. (The fourth type – the exclusive parish – hardly corresponds to the empirical reality.) The *open parish* is accessible, or supposedly so, and does not have a strong Christian profile. This type fits in well with modern consumerism. Everyone 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". That does not simply mean that they are "ashamed of the gospel". 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. Everyone
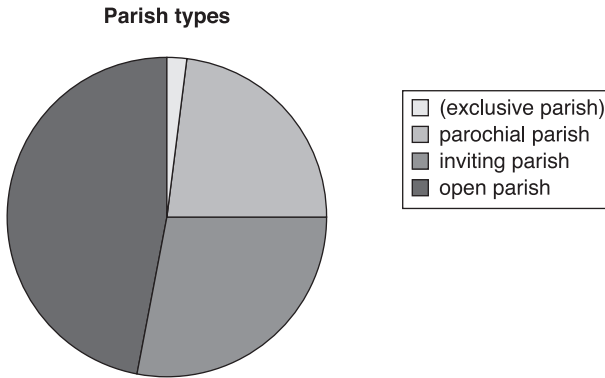
Parish types

Legend:
- □ (exclusive parish)
- ▨ parochial parish
- ▨ inviting parish
- ▮ open parish

FIGURE 1
Share of parish types in the survey

is allowed to decide for themselves to what extent they will participate or identify with the Roman Catholic Church.

The *inviting parish* combines high accessibility with a strong Christian profile. Everyone who is searching for "something more" is welcome, highly motivated or not, 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 a problem that people behave as consumers; they are invited to become confessing and practising Christians.

The *parochial parish* combines low accessibility with a weak Christian profile. You cannot easily start to participate in this parish. Nor is it clear what to expect or to gather what is expected from you. In a way this is typical of a *community* as defined by Ferdinand Tönnies. A community is simply there (*zuhanden*) (Bauman, 2001: 7–20). It was there before and meant to stay. 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 just *is*. Sympathetic as this Heideggerian attitude may be, this is probably the type of parish that has given the adjective "parochial" its meaning. *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987) says: "People who are *parochial* think only about their own local affairs and interests."

Raising the interpretation of the data to a higher level of abstraction, one may conclude that parishes are facing severe challenges. They are coming from a situation in which, for a period of nearly a century, participation was self-evident. Being part of Catholic subculture meant participating in the local parish. Within this subculture, the Catholic Church held a religious monopoly. Nowadays, 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.

Our starting point was the disagreement about the strategy of religious organizations in a context of pluralism. We found out that Dutch Catholic parishes do not favour the strategy of the radical exclusive firm. Furthermore, the polarity between an inclusive and an exclusive strategy does not seem to be very helpful in understanding the challenges these parishes are facing now. Catholic parishes are not yet inclined to make a choice in this respect. What parishes are experiencing is the strategic challenge of holding on to a Christian profile while trying to stay in contact with the public. We found three typical ways of dealing with this dilemma. We will make some speculative remarks about the prospects for these three types of parish.

The *inviting parish* tries to remain open without forsaking its identity. It has a strong theological motivation to be accessible. This is the position defended by authors who believe there is a future for a church caring for its spiritual traditions and offering elements of these traditions to the faithful and to non-believers, those of other faiths, ex-believers, and believers-to-be (cf. Hellemans et al., 2003). Theological and management skills are required to put this into practice. If these are present, this strategy may work successfully. In our view, this is the most interesting and the most promising type.

The *open* parish deals with the dilemma by giving priority to the accessibility of the parish. These 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 to the local community, this may be a successful way of operating. The strength of these parishes lies in the commitment of the volunteering parishioners. Their main concern is recruiting volunteers from the new generation for new activities.

The outlook for the *parochial parish* is the worst. 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 sport clubs and cultural activities is weak, these parishes may survive. In fact, however, these are probably not very vital parishes. The future of these parishes is insecure. In this case, models of cooperation and mergers only conceal the fact that there is no future in their marginal position.

Historical Context

In conclusion, we explain our findings and highlight their strategic significance by relating them to the recent history of Roman Catholic parishes in the Netherlands. It is likely that our data indicate a lack of reflection on the question ''Who does our parish exist for?''. Thinking about what the parish has to offer and about its openness, members of the parish council will be

inclined to think about openness to people like the people already active in the parish ''community'', with questions, needs and longings very much like theirs.

Only the parishes that have the self-image of what we call an ''inviting parish'' seem to be ready to start seriously reflecting in a concrete way on what the Catholic parish can mean in the present-day society and culture, and to whom. They want to combine their strong Christian and Catholic identities with high accessibility, apparently considering openness an aspect of this identity. From there, it makes sense for them to ask what this openness means in practical terms and how it should be realized, given the concrete situation of the parish.

Imagining one's parish as an ''open parish'', highly accessible and with a low Christian and Catholic profile, can express an almost total lack of reflection on the specific mission of a Catholic parish in the current religious situation. It can, however, also hide deep reflections on today's secularized society, its diffuse religious needs and the role of religious traditions, in the spirit of Hervieu-Léger (1993) and Davie (2000). More research is important here, especially qualitative research on mission statements, policy plans, minutes of parish council discussions and publications in parish journals.

The fact that so few parishes have a strong Christian and Catholic profile is to a significant degree explicable by the particular situation of the Dutch Church after the Second Vatican Council. From 1970 onwards, a number of bishops were appointed with the purpose of changing the profile of the Dutch Bishops Conference, that the Roman authorities considered to be ''too progressive'' and too weak, allowing the Catholic identity of the Dutch church to be watered down. The new bishops started a policy of pursuing a strong Catholic identity by stressing traditional, and in the view of many Dutch Catholics at that time, outdated doctrines and practices (Auwerda, 1988). The majority of the Dutch Catholics tried to defend the space they thought important for themselves and the Catholic Church in a modernizing society and culture, simply by not going along with the initiatives to re-Catholicize their Church. Theirs was a passive opposition. Many of them eventually left the Church, sometimes gravely disappointed by what they felt as lack of Episcopal support or even Episcopal opposition to what they thought important, often simply tired by the ecclesial difficulties and discussions, but also—and this is a factor that is usually strongly underestimated—finding that their faith had simply lost the pertinence it once had in their own lives (Beelen, 1993).

The point of this article is, however, that never in the turbulent history of the Dutch Catholic Church since 1970, has this led to an explicit debate on what the Catholic Church should and could mean for Dutch society. Moreover, there was no consultation by the Dutch Bishops Conference or a single diocese, nor was there an open debate by the Eighth of May Movement (Acht Mei Beweging), the organization that came into existence in protest *against* the official programme of the papal visit to the Netherlands in 1985 and that, until its end in 2003, considered itself a platform for discussions on necessary changes in Church and society. Apparently, the future of Dutch Catholicism as something to be theologically reflected upon, scientifically

analysed and discussed, and organizationally developed, was too much of a taboo for all the parties involved (cf. Borgman et al., 1995).

As long as this taboo remains unbroken, it is unlikely that the Catholic Church will play any significant role in future Dutch society. As a reaction to the Church's internal political polarization since 1970, the Dutch Catholics have actively ''unlearned'' to reflect on the relationships between the mission, the factual situation and the organizational structure of their church. Research like ours can show what this means in terms of consequences and can reveal the images, views and insights that Catholics act upon while running branches or sub-organizations of the Church. This can raise awareness of what is in fact being done and clarify why a debate on what should be done is necessary, as well as become the starting point of this debate. Opening, facilitating and directing the debate, however, are not matters of scientific research, but matters of policy.

NOTES

[1.] This is in accordance with proposition 42 of *Acts of Faith*: ''Among religious organizations, there is a reciprocal relationship between the degree of lay commitment and the degree of exclusivity'' (Stark and Finke, 2000: 142). Indeed, Blau and Scott (1963: 45) have already mentioned ''religious sects'' as an example of mutual benefit associations.

[2.] All the statements were presented with a 4-point scale (applies strongly, applies, applies to some extent, does not apply [or hardly]).

[3.] We assume that, when filling out the questionnaire, they will have expressed the image of the parish they have in mind while running it, and in that sense the operative ''self-image of the parish''. A survey like this cannot take into account the diversity of opinions and interests that exists within a parish. Case studies (cf. Ammerman et al., 1997) may shed light on these internal power relations.

[4.] We took the two scores ''Does not apply (or hardly)'' and ''Applies to some extent'' together as a low score; ''Applies'' and ''Applies strongly'' were taken together as a high score.

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