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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FROM INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE TO PARISH CULTURE:

A STUDY OF TWO CATHOLIC PARISHES

IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN THE CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

LUCAS S. SHARMA

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2012

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For the parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene and St. Pius Catholic Parishes

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## ABSTRACT

The Roman Catholic Church is unique in having a unified set of institutional teachings across one billion people in the world including sixty million American Catholics. However, previous quantitative and qualitative studies in sociology suggest that Catholics are not unified in their beliefs but are actually quite diverse. Additionally, Baggett (2009) suggests that Catholics form distinct parish cultures on the local level, and that these parishes are the location that a majority of Catholics experience their faith. What is not known, however, is how Catholic parishes form cultures, especially around political and moral issues. This study aims to understand exactly this by sampling a parish focused on social justice and a parish focused on respect life ministry.

The method of this study is a qualitative study of two Catholic parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Through participant observation and twenty interviews with parishioners, staff, and priests at each parish, I examined how parish cultures were formed. The first church, a self-proclaimed progressive church, formed an “all are welcome” collective cultural narrative to welcome those who were alienated by the church. The second church, the respect life church, features a very active respect life group that is attempting to redefine the parish culture into a “culture of life,” stemming from teachings of John Paul II. At both churches, what I observed was a negotiation of individual conscience and a collective sharing. The result was two different shared

cultures – one on the parish level, and one on a small group level that was attempting to reform the parish level.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND RESEARCH METHODS

The Roman Catholic Church is unique in having a unified set of teachings worldwide for one billion people across the world, including sixty million Americans, two third of who are registered at parishes (Baggett 2006). Both worldwide and in the United States, the Catholic Church has also entered the public sphere on political issues worldwide (Cassanova 1994) and encourages individual Catholics to form their own individual consciences so that they promote truth when engaging in politics (USCCB 2011). For example, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issues a voter's guide that lists the official teachings of the Church and instructs Catholics to vote in a way that promotes truth and avoids evil (USCCB 2011:7).

Despite these unified teachings and a voter's guide to instruct Catholics in the public sphere, quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews have shown that Catholics are more diverse in their beliefs than unified (D'Antonio *et al* 2007; Dillon 1996; Dillon 1999; Dillon 2001; Hoge 2002; Hoge 2005; Baggett 2006; Baggett 2009; Williams and Davidson 1996; Lugo *et al* 2008). For the millions of American Catholics involved in a local parish, their primary collective experience of Catholicism is experienced in this context. Just as there exists a diversity of American Catholics, Baggett (2009) suggests that there is also a plurality of Catholic "parish cultures." What is not known is how parish cultures emerge, especially when they focus on specific political and moral issues. Despite a recognition that Catholics negotiate their faith and intentionally form these

cultures, sociologists have not fully explored the process of parish culture formation.

Through an ethnography in two Archdiocese of Chicago parishes, the goal of this study is to answer how these parishes have developed cultures around political and moral issues. Specifically, I argue that the Catholic parishioners in this study took seriously the call to develop consciences mandated by the institutional church. Coming together in their local parishes, they negotiated difficult questions about life, sexuality, and politics, and constructed cultures that reflected their own conscience formation. This paper explores how two parishes negotiated the same process but resulted in parish differences. In the process of the research, I found that one parish developed an “all are welcome” cultural narrative while the other parish’s respect life group is working to redefine the moral cultural discourse of the parish. I also explore how this affected their relationships with the larger institutional church, who the parishes partnered with in their ministries, and how the Archdiocese of Chicago responded to them.

To understand how parish cultures are formed, I am framing this study in the larger sociological conversations around American Catholicism, religious congregations, and political preferences. In chapter two, I look at the first parish in detail, St. Mary Magdalene Parish, a self proclaimed progressive social justice parish with an “all are welcome” motto. I argue that St. Mary Magdalene Parishioners have developed a narrative around this motto, and this narrative shapes the work that the parish is able to do and the culture of the parish. In chapter three, I turn to St. Pius Parish, a parish with a strong Respect Life Ministry that is attempting to reframe the cultural discourse of their parish to be one more closely aligned with a morally conservative Catholic message. Finally, in chapter four, I bring together these two parishes to discuss how members of

these parishes took their individual consciences and collectively shared them in their parish groups and communities.

### **Literature Review**

Rather than have a unified faith, both qualitative and quantitative sociologists have argued that American Catholics are a population with a diversity of beliefs (D'Antonio *et al* 2007; Dillon 1999; Dillon 1996; Hoge 2002; Hoge 2005; Baggett 2006; Baggett 2009; Williams and Davidson 1996; Lugo *et al* 2008). Furthermore, sociologists have argued that Catholics actively negotiate their faith and are shaped by greater trends in culture and society (Baggett 2009). For example, Williams and Davidson (1996) found that conceptions of Catholic faith shifted from a collective and institutionally conception to an individually constructed identity. Prior to the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), Catholics saw the church as 'mediating the relationship between God and an individual; they defined the institutional church as essential to one's relationship with God' (274). Vatican II "asked the laity to take greater responsibility for their faith" (278). The Church asked Catholics to make their own decisions in regards to *moral issues* (Featherstone 2001). Consequently, a shift from an institutional towards an *individualistic* identity began to be cultivated. Catholics growing up in the '70s and '80s were raised with a particular emphasis on a personal relationship with God (Williams and Davidson 1996). This ushered in a new sense of identity, one that emphasized that a "good Catholic did not need to have regular Mass attendance, participate in the sacraments, or contribute to the church; instead, being a 'good' person was emphasized by a majority of those in the study" (284).

As the American Catholic identity became more individualistic, the term “cafeteria Catholic” emerged colloquially to signal Catholics who pick and choose their faith as if they are walking through a cafeteria. While the term does signal a shift in understandings of what it means to be Catholic in the United States today, sociologists dismiss this term as pejorative and lacking utility:

The term ‘cafeteria Catholic’ has been used to condemn members who have strong commitments to some parts of the faith but not others. We agree... that some Catholics feel undue guilt when they hear this criticism. Everyone is, to some degree, a cafeteria Catholic and nobody should condemn individual Catholics for making choices. We believe the term ‘cafeteria Catholic’ should be expunged from the research glossary as being too value-laden and polemical. (Hoge 2002: 295).

Arguing that only seven percent of all Catholics agree with ALL teachings of the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> (D’Antonio *et al* 2007:47-48), sociologists argue instead for the terms *core* and *periphery* (Burns 1996). These terms are much more analytically useful as they separate what is the most central to being Catholic (core) from the fringes of Catholicism (periphery). Included in the core are creedal beliefs (Hoge 2005), beliefs that Jesus physically rose from the dead, and that transubstantiation happens in the Eucharist (Hoge 2002; D’Antonio *et al* 2007). Falling to the periphery include teachings on sexual morality including birth control, and weekly mass attendance (Hoge 2002; Hoge 2005; D’Antonio *et al* 2007; Featherstone 2001).

Finally, Baggett (2009) studied six parishes in the San Francisco Bay Area and concluded that Catholics are not randomly picking and choosing elements of the Church

---

<sup>1</sup> This refers to all teachings included in the survey. The teachings included were varied and covered a wide range of Catholic Church teachings. For example, creedal beliefs such as transubstantiation and the resurrection of Jesus were on the survey. The survey also asked but was not limited to about specific prayer rituals considered important by the Church, teachings on sexuality, teaching on financial giving, and the authority of the Vatican.

but instead are negotiating their faith in ways that reflect their commitments in reasoned, structured ways. Indeed, from his ethnographies and interviews with 300 Catholics, he argues that

like other Americans, Catholics negotiate with religious culture, but they do not do this in a pell-mell fashion... Their faiths, in other words, are not 'religion ala carte,' as if the menu of cultural options were unlimited. Nor do they practice an anything-goes 'pastiche style' of spirituality unencumbered by the imaginative parameters of their tradition. Contrary to popular conceits, Catholics are actually constrained by their religious tradition in the sense that it equips them to understand, expect, and even want certain insights about and connections to the sacred – and not others. Moreover, their appropriation of religious culture is also frequently constrained by the specific versions of it presented to them within the local parish (Baggett 2009:42).

For Baggett, then, the parish is an important place because it mediates the individual's experience of Catholicism and provides specific versions of Catholicism. Burns (1996) argues that Catholicism as a religious cultural tradition has a common language, identity, and symbols. What varies is the interpretation of these resources, or as Burns says, the diversity of ways the resources are used, including dissent. Baggett's (2009) ethnography provides six examples of ways in which parishes have constructed cultures relying on the tools and resources given from Catholicism. Yet what is still unknown is how these parishes construct these cultures, and how dissent around certain church teachings emerges at one parish while another parish embraces those teachings.

### *Congregational Culture*

As Baggett's study suggests, two thirds of American Catholics practice their faith in the context of the parish, therefore making the local congregation an important component of understanding Catholicism today. Across all religious traditions, there are more than 300,000 religious congregations across the United States (Chaves 2004:3). A

congregation is defined as a “social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious context and purpose” (1-2). Warner (1994) suggests a *de facto congregationalism* meaning that in the United States, American religious life is organized around the local congregation. He suggests that the local congregation may be more important to study than the denomination because “congregations within the same denomination vary widely in theology, liturgy, and social values” (74-76).

Many studies in the sociology of religion, consequently, have studied the congregation (Ammerman 1997; Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Davidson and Fournier 2006; Edgell Becker 1999; Wedam 2000). These studies suggest that congregations form distinct and local organizational cultures. Culture is understood here in this study as “behaviors, objects, and ideas that appear to express, or to stand for, something else” (Griswold 2008:11); essentially culture involves shared meanings understood by a group of people. Congregations, groups of individuals, form shared meanings that are held together in common by others in the congregation or parish. Edgell Becker (1999) found that congregations “develop distinct cultures that comprise local understandings of identity and mission” (7). Similarly, congregations develop specific cultures centering around “physical artifacts, patterns of activity, and the language and story that embellish those objects and activities with meaning” (Ammerman 1997:47). “Culture is, then, in part, patterns of activity through which the congregation communicates to itself and others what it is about” (57).



Additionally, congregations form groups to develop fellowship, disseminate religious education, make decisions, and engage in social ministries. The services they provide attract people to join them (Wuthnow 1994:46). These congregations make intentional (but not always consensual) decisions on how and what to emphasize, based on the congregational culture they are intending to create and maintain. Similarly, Lichterman (2005) argues that the cultural *customs* of a group influence how they understand one another and how they make decisions about what kind of civic action they engage in. By studying congregational culture, we can understand how and why certain programs will be offered, and why some of the cultural resources, tools, and customs of Catholicism Burns (1996) describes are valued over others (Edgell Becker 1999: 158). This is the goal of this study – to link congregational studies to an understanding of how Catholic parishes form cultures around political issues and how they negotiate their conscience and the larger institutional church. To understand this, it is finally important to examine how American Catholics engage in the public sphere individually and collectively.

### *Catholicism and American Politics*

When it comes to politics in the United States, the American Bishops have not shied away from entering the public sphere to make known the teachings of the Church (Cassanova 1994). Historically, United States Bishops have written pastoral letters about peace and justice, and they have vocally condemned abortion. Trying to define the common good for all of society, the Bishops argue that society should guarantee economic justice for all members in the society, and that international peace will come with disarmament. What unifies these teachings is a fundamental belief in the *dignity of*

*all human life from conception to natural death* (USCCB 2011). In a voting guide published by the USSCB for each presidential elections, the Bishop urge Catholics to weigh the Church's teachings on life issues (from abortion to death penalty), sexuality (against same sex marriage), and protection of the poor in society. Recognizing that the teachings do not fall perfectly into either the Democrat or Republican Party, the Church urges Catholics to develop their own conscience, "the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do good while shunning what is evil" (7).

Because the teachings on politics do not fall under one political party (USCCB 2011; Wald 2003: 163; Kniss 2003), Catholics must form their conscience and act vote accordingly. While Catholics were once predominately Democrat voters, since 1960 the Catholic electorate has shifted towards the middle and right side of the political spectrum, and now statistically vote similarly to the greater American public (D'Antonio *et al* 2007). For example, Catholics hold beliefs similar to the American public on issues such as abortion, stem cell research, same-sex marriage, and the death penalty (Lugo *et al* 2008). D'Antonio *et al* (2007) argues that it is not mass attendance that correlates political preferences, but actual political affiliation (139). Thus, they conclude that "American Catholics tend to be making party choices on the basis of a narrow selection of Catholic Church teaching that divide basically into prenatal values versus post natal expressions of human values" (140). While on the surface this seems to suggest that the local parish is not important to voting behavior, Baggett (2009) argues that Catholics experience their Catholicism within the local parish, and as such, are shaped by the

teachings presented to them in their communities. This includes political and moral issues.

Studies of congregations reveal that congregations negotiate politics and attempt to influence the public sphere from their position as a congregation. For example, Wald (2003) concluded that congregant's political viewpoints were a greater predictor of an individual's political preferences, over personal religious outlook (196). Chaves (2004) found that over 70% of Catholic parishes had participated in at least one political activity (112-113). This is not a surprise given that one of the options for political activity was the distribution of a voter's guide, and this may include the one published by the USCCB.

Multiple studies have commented on Catholic involvement in politics at different parishes (Baggett 2006; Bane 2005; DiSalvo 2008; Huckfeldt *et al* 1993; Legee 1988). Huckfeldt *et al* (1993) found that Catholic were more likely to be influenced by their parishes politically if they attended regularly. Similarly, Perl and McClintock (2001) found that Catholics who attended frequently were more likely to oppose abortion, capital punishment, and welfare "child caps" (275). Thus, in addition to learning a version of Catholicism from the local parish, as Baggett (2009) concludes, political preferences and beliefs are influenced too by participation in the parish.

It is important to understand how the priest affects parish projects and greater parish culture. Warner (1990) argued that as the pastor changed in the Presbyterian Church he studied, so did the church political culture. Ammerman (2005) found that Catholic priests select certain issues to discuss and were more likely to talk about political issues than other religious leaders. Studying the discussion of specific political issues, Smith (2008) found that priests had little impact on voting decisions of

parishioners, but did impact their willingness to trust the Church and their conceptions of God (183). Thus, the priest is important for parishioner engagement with politics but is not the only determinant. In this study, I weigh seriously the impact of each parish priest on the formation of parish culture and take their own leadership into account when attempting to understand how parish culture is constructed and negotiated.

### *Competing Visions of Truth*

As noted above, central to the discussion in this study is the formation of individual conscience particularly around sexuality, and the understanding of moral truth. Hunter (1991) famously argues that the United States is in a “culture war” – a war of two opposing understandings of moral authority and truth. He labels these as an “impulse towards orthodoxy” and an “impulse towards progressivism” (43). The orthodox understand truth as coming from transcendent principles whereas the progressive sees truth as rooted in rationality and experience (44).

Scholars have questioned the empirical validity of Hunter’s culture war thesis. For example, in Williams’s (1997) edited volume, *Culture Wars in American Politics*, many essays critique the thesis and offer alternate understandings of the thesis. Importantly, Kniss (1997/2003) maps moral order on two axes rather than one like Hunter does. In his mapping, religious groups have different understandings based on the locus of moral authority (traditional vs. modernism), and a second axis measuring moral project. This moral project “addresses the question of where moral action or influence should be targeted” (Kniss 2003: 334), and consists of the libertarian individual project and the communal collective good. Thus, for Kniss, American political culture cannot be divided

simply into orthodox and progressive as Hunter suggests, but includes four distinct ways of understanding moral authority and social action.

In this mapping, Catholics are oriented to moral projects that look to the “common good” which is consistent with the Catholic Church’s emphasis on discerning the common good (USCCB 2011). Importantly, Kniss (2003) separates Roman Catholics into “Catholics” and “pro-change Catholics.” Whereas general Catholics have a traditional understanding of truth and authority, pro-change Catholics are placed between the traditional and modernist conceptions of moral authority. This is because these pro-change Catholics recognize both the authority of the church and their own individual reason. Thus, Kniss’s analysis is more applicable to this study than Hunter’s (1991) because it nuances the complexities and diversities of American Catholicism, as described in more detail above. This study will examine how two parishes developed cultures with differing conceptions of moral authority.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to understand how parishes form cultures around politics and religious truth. Parishes form *internal political cultures* which are “at least partially shared by its constituents – a set of shared assumptions, perceptions of the world, symbols, and concepts that help them interpret and act in the political world” (Wood 2002: 154). Though partially constructed from larger institutional messages, parish priest leadership, and the aggregate of the parishioners, parish culture is not simply the sum of these various components. In this study, I take seriously the actual process of conscience negotiation, as does Baggett (2009) and I examine the result of this negotiation on the meso (parish) level. Parishes incorporate both “individual commitments and larger

traditions” and form specific cultures to meet the needs of their parishioners (Edgell Becker 1999). Catholics have a multitude of resources drawing from the tradition and can organize and construct them to support the Church or to dissent from it (Burns 1996).

Recognizing that Catholics intentionally construct their consciences and religious identities, it is my goal to understand how parishioners and parish leaders work together to form these specific cultures around political issues and religious truth. Specifically, I ask, a) how do parishes negotiate their faith collectively and form cultures around politics? b) How does a parish culture emerge focused on issues such as social justice, homosexuality and women’s ordination while another emerges around respect life issues like abortion and the protection of the vulnerable? How these cultures are continually negotiated? c) How does this impact the relationship between the parishes and the greater local Catholic Church? I argue that the Catholics at both of the parishes in this study took seriously the call from the Church to form their conscience, and did so on both the individual and parish level. The result of the parish negotiations can be seen in the internal political culture of both the social justice and the respect life parish.

### **Methods**

The goal of this study is to understand how two Catholic parishes negotiated the Church’s teachings and engage in larger projects in their parishes. To understand negotiations, a comparative ethnographic study of two parishes was the most appropriate method. I followed the method of ethnography used by Moon (2004) in her study of two Methodist conversations. Moon approached her study as a conversation between her and her participants (6); she follows the ethnographic approach *extended case method* which “inform[s] and expand[s] existing theories by making them account for an increasingly

broad range of observed circumstances” (244). Understood thus far is that Catholics negotiate their faith and form their consciences based, and that Catholic parishes form distinct parish cultures. This study expands this theory by showing how two Catholic parishes formed their consciences collectively and how cultures emerged in each parish as a result of the cultures, particularly around issues of life and sexuality. Consequently, this form of participant observation was especially relevant as my goal was to understand how parish political culture is constructed and negotiated.

Both parishes chosen for this study were located in the Archdiocese of Chicago and inside the city of Chicago. To conduct the study, I contacted each pastor and obtained consent to participate in the parish. Both pastors consented after I guaranteed that I would not use the actual names of any parishioners or the parishes, and as such, all names in this study, including other organizations the parishes partnered with, are given pseudonyms. This is to ensure confidentiality of all priests, parishioners, and organizations in this study.

As an ethnographer, my goal was to blend in as a researcher and neither pastor announced my presence in the parish. I began attending meetings, masses, and parish events to gain a sense of each parish culture. In addition to an ethnography of each parish, I identified parish leaders who are actively involved in the parish. Chaves (2004) found that there are often a small number of parishioners or congregants who help set the agenda for the parish activities. After identifying these leaders in the parish, I conducted twenty interviews with parish lay leaders, staff, and priests at each parish.

The first parish in the study was St. Mary Magdalene Parish, a self proclaimed progressive Catholic parish. The parish cultivated and embraced this progressive identity

in the mid-80s and has continued to be a place where they try to make all feel welcome.

Not only is the parish known in the Archdiocese as a liberal parish, but during my fieldwork a parishioner gave me a copy of a major American publication in 1994 in which St. Mary Magdalene was featured for the same reputation.<sup>2</sup> From January to August 2011, I participated in field work at the parish and attended masses, meetings, and parish events. Working with the pastor, Fr. Dennis, I identified parishioners, staff, and clergy to interview who were actively involved in the parish. In total, I interviewed twenty parishioners – three clergy including former pastor Fr. Sean Kavanaugh, three staff members, and fourteen lay leaders. Nine of the participants were men and eleven were women ranging in age from 30 to 80 years old. Additionally, some parishioners had grown up in the parish while others had only been attending for a few years.

The second parish I selected was St. Pius Parish. St. Pius Parish is known in the Archdiocese of Chicago as being a parish with a very strong Respect Life Ministry. Based on a list provided by the Archdiocese of Chicago's Respect Life Office, St. Pius Parish is among the top five most active parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago, among the over three hundred parishes. While I similarly participated in a variety of meetings, masses, and events, the Respect Life Ministry at the parish was the focus of my fieldwork at St. Pius Parish. I participated in a five-month ethnography between November 2012 and March 2013. Similarly to St. Mary Magdalene Parish, I identified twenty lay leaders, staff, and priests to interview. In total, I interviewed two clergy members, one staff member, and thirteen lay leaders. Seven of the participants were men and thirteen were women. While I recognize that in both parishes, more lay women were interviewed than

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<sup>2</sup> This publication is not cited here in attempt to keep the location of the parish confidential.



men, Leege (1988) found that women were more engaged in parishes than men, and as such, the ratio reflects larger trends in American Catholic parish life.

While St. Mary Magdalene Parish had a clear parish culture centered around the all are welcome narrative, the Respect Life group were aiming to reform the cultural discourse of the parish to reflect what they believed was the “culture of life.” The parishes selected for this study were in two different points in parish culture development. What is interesting about this is that a process of parish culture development is currently happening at St. Pius Parish, whereas the St. Mary Magdalene parishioners relayed the story of how the process had already happened at their parish. Thus, not only do the parishes differ in conceptions of truth, content of the parish work, but they also differ in how established the culture is at each parish.

I now turn to the findings of this study. In chapter two, I discuss St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the self proclaimed social justice parish and examine how they developed their “all are welcome” cultural narrative. In chapter three, I turn to St. Pius Parish, the parish with the strong Respect Life Group, and look at how the group is actively working to reframe the cultural discourse of their parish. Finally, in chapter four, I bring the parishes together in a larger discussion of the institutional church, individual conscience, and the process of forming cultural discourses around politics, life, and sexuality. Because of the different conceptions of truth around these moral and political issues, each parish had different symbolic boundaries, groups they partnered with, and responses from the Archdiocese of Chicago.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ALL ARE WELCOME: CONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE OF ST. MARY

#### MAGDALENE PARISH

*Let us build a house where love can dwell, where all can safely live  
A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive  
Full of hopes and dreams and vision, rock of faith and vault of grace  
Here the love of Christ will end divisions,  
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.<sup>1</sup>*

The church has just finished communion, and the priest asks everyone to stand. I assume it will be time for the final blessing, but instead, the choir begins the song, “All are Welcome,” a Catholic hymn in the folk style of music. It is upbeat, and its verses sing of welcoming the outcast, the stranger, all into the church, to a place where all are welcome. This song is St. Mary Magdalene’s self proclaimed theme song – they proudly advertise that here at their Centennial Mass, marking one hundred years, they stand as a place where *all are welcome*. Fr. Dennis, the pastor, walks around the church with incense and as he walks by each section, the congregation looks at him and makes the sign of the cross. He continues throughout the church as the choir keeps singing, and processes back to the front.

This event is an excerpt from St. Mary Magdalene’s hundred year centennial celebration kick off mass in November of 2011. Yet, more than just an anecdote, this story reflects what I argue is a *collective narrative* that has been established in the parish

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<sup>1</sup> First verse and chorus of the Marty Haugen song, “All Are Welcome”

culture of St. Mary Magdalene Parish. As discussed in the introduction chapter, St. Mary Magdalene Parish is a self proclaimed progressive Roman Catholic Parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Here, the parish focuses on attempting to welcome others and to build a parish oriented around social justice.

After providing a brief history of St. Mary Magdalene taken from their own constructive narrative, I argue that this culture emerged because two central individuals, Forrest Jackson and Fr. Sean Kavanaugh activated what was already a progressive spirit. Through the formation of various programs, such as the folk gym mass, the liturgical dance team, the lay preaching team, and discussions around justice, the St. Mary Magdalene community established a reputation that they were indeed a liberal Catholic parish, and they have embraced this narrative. This collective narrative is a cultural resource, a tool that influences the work of the parish. What is substantial about it is that this narrative influences what types of projects will be deemed acceptable at the parish, and the narrative persists even as programs run their course and fade away. Additionally, I argue that the parish leadership itself reinforces the collective narrative in its own ministerial focus. This collective narrative is shared by both the members of the congregation who hold it and expect it, and the leadership team who in response to their own values and the demands of the people, continue to produce it in everyday parish life.

### **Defining Social Justice, Open and Progressive**

The terms “social justice”, “open” and “progressive” are used throughout this thesis to describe the parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene Parish. The parish defines itself as a social justice parish, a parish the focuses much of its discussion on issues of peace and justice. Additionally, they strive to be “open” to all who feel marginalized by the

Church, including gay and lesbian people, and people who believe women should be ordained as priests. Finally, the term progressive denotes that the Catholics in this study are on the left of the spectrum of Catholicism. For Baggett (2009), progressive was a term that the parish Saint Monica used to describe themselves, meaning that the parish utilized Vatican II language, had a woman pastoral associate, and had a pastor whose homilies were theologically liberal (47). Here at St. Mary Magdalene Parish, priests and pastoral associates frequently speak of and use justice imagery in their homilies and bulletins, parishioners talk of Vatican II in the way they frame their involvement, and a woman has traditionally said the Good Friday service at the parish for the last ten years,

Dillon (1999) used the term “pro-change” to refer to “Catholics who are gay or lesbian, advocates of women’s ordination, or pro choice on abortion” (9). These pro-change Catholics are those “who articulate a Catholic identity that challenges the official church view” (242). Though parishioners did not talk about being pro-choice with me, the Catholics of St. Mary Magdalene Parish challenge the Church’s teachings on homosexuality and women’s ordination in conversation at the parish and in meetings with the Archdiocese, as described below. Because parishioners, staff and priests used the terms, throughout this chapter, the terms social justice, progressive, and open will be used. The description of the parish as open and progressive will be used interchangeably because they both refer to the parish’s desire to be open to excluded Catholics and to promote a “pro-change” agenda, similar to that in Dillon’s (1999) study.

## **Parish History**

### *The Early Years and the Changes of Vatican II*

It is Easter Vigil Mass, the night before Easter morning, proclaimed by the Church as the most holy of holy nights of the year, for it is the night that Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead ensuring salvation for all. As is custom in the Catholic Church, there are six or seven biblical readings tracking the history of Christian salvation. After five readings, the lector climbs the ambo and begins with the words, “A Reading from the History of St. Mary Magdalene Parish.” The reading, written by parish staff, tracks the history of the parish beginning with its foundations in the 1912. In the early years, as described in the reading, the parish followed the trajectory of a typical immigrant Catholic parish providing a grade school education, church sacraments, and a supportive community (McGreevy 1996: 15). Yet, as described in the reading, the parish turned a new leaf with the changes of Vatican II:

In the mid-1960’s, the reforms of the Second Vatican II council rocked the Church establishment, ushering in sweeping changes to the liturgy and inviting the laity to a whole new level of involvement. Pastors [names] helped guide the parish into this new era, establishing the foundations for a lay-led pastoral council (Easter Vigil Reading Provided by Parish).

At the same time across the country, Catholics were growing in their education levels, becoming more middle class (McGreevy 1996: 80). Embracing the spirit of Vatican II and lay involvement, parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene describe this period as a time of transition leading up to the coming of their most recent long time pastor, Sean Kavanaugh in 1984. This transition was one in which parishioners did in fact become more active in their faith through participation in the liturgy and in parish operations. During these years following the Vatican II Council changes, long time parishioner Erica

Stone notes, “the parish council was formed while we were living here too, and my husband was the first head of that; that was when the church started changing, and they wanted to have lay participation in what was going on.”

In addition to these Vatican II changes that ushered in changing forms of participation, many parishioners look back to the time between Vatican II and the arrival of Fr. Kavanaugh as a time when their spirituality came alive through small faith sharing groups. A university theology professor attending the church, Forrest Jackson, introduced a model of small faith sharing groups in the 1970s in which communities of individuals would get together frequently to share their faith and discuss the relevance of Catholicism in their lives. Brooke Reynolds describes her participation in such a group:

At that time, when Forrest Jackson started the small core groups [35 years ago], everybody signed up. We have a home group, a faith group, and our faith group has been meeting for probably 35 years. We meet every other week at people’s homes and we go through the Sunday readings and discuss how they affect our lives and how we can affect other people’s lives. It makes me think about my relationships with God and fellows around me. So I think it gives us, it gives me a sense of who I am and where I am going.

At the same time, during the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, another retreat program brought together many parishioners in an experience that parishioner Opal Simpson describes as a *Christ Experience*: “We are solid in the Lord because we had a Christ experience. It was the most significant thing that happened in the building of this parish.” These experiences in the retreat program led to small groups forming as well. These, like those started by Forrest Jackson, continue to meet today. Other parishioners echo this sentiment, sharing how these faith groups have grounded and sustained their active involvement in the parish since they were started in the early ‘80s. As such, the small faith sharing groups, coupled with the Vatican II invitation for increased lay involvement planted the seeds for

the development of the progressive social justice culture that was fully activated by the coming of Sean Kavanaugh.

*1984: The Beginning of the Kavanaugh Years*

It is impossible to understand the parish culture that exists today without understanding the coming of Father Sean Kavanaugh in 1984. After experiencing Vatican II and an increased participation in faith, parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene Parish continued to desire a more full and active participation. As described in the reading on Easter Vigil below, Fr. Kavanaugh's arrival marked a fundamental change in the incipient culture and collective narrative today:

By 1984, when Father Sean Kavanaugh became pastor, the dramatic changes within Church and society brought new questions about how to be parish. New neighbors brought a diversity of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation that enlivened the conversation. Innovative responses to our emerging identity included the creation of Heart To Heart, the gym mass, Regional Catholic Preparatory School and the parish-wide Synod. The benefits of these innovations are still felt today as new ministries are established to respond to the needs of our dynamic and evolving community. Together we strive to make our motto true – All are Welcome (Easter Vigil Reading Provided by Parish).

By the time Fr. Kavanaugh was named pastor in 1984, the parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene were ready for a renewal of their parish. Lay involvement and small faith sharing groups had become central to the identity of the parish. Described by parishioner Brooke Reynolds, the Archdiocese of Chicago sent a representative to ask the parishioners what kind of pastor they would like to have. "We asked for an open pastor. The old priest that was retired living here, he was super conservative, just an old man. And the one that followed him was pretty conservative. We as a parish had started to become more open, so that is why we as a parish and the people who came to the meeting with the person from the Archdiocese were seeking an open priest."

It is important to note this desire for the open priest. In an interview conducted with Fr. Kavanaugh, he notes the active involvement of the parishioners in trying to find a pastor to fit what was stirring within them:

The people, when they heard that I was going to be appointed as pastor, they contacted me and I went to their houses to listen. They said, we'll get a bunch of people together and we'll talk about our interests in the parish. They kept saying, *we are ready*. There could be renaissance of some sort. They were interested in fuller participation, a more interesting liturgy, and a remaking of the liturgy. They thought that there should be more communication between the priest and the people, sort of democratization of the parish. (Emphasis added).

Sean Kavanaugh entered the parish in 1984 and remained pastor for the next twenty two years. It during his time at St. Mary Magdalene that the collective narrative and parish culture was actualized. In these years, as the parish grappled with “the questions about how to be parish,” their response was to become a progressive parish. Fr. Kavanaugh encouraged this, and as a result, the collective narrative, already in the hearts of the parishioners, became activated.

### **Collective Narrative and Culture**

The goal of this project is to understand how specific parish cultures emerge and persist. Consequently, I understand and study the sociology of religion through a cultural approach (Edgell 2012). Culture is understood here as “behaviors, objects, and ideas that appear to express, or to stand for, something else” (Griswold 2008:11). Culture expresses meaning and that meaning is understood by a group of people; in this case, the group is the local parish. I follow Baggett’s (2009: 335) conception of culture as “the historical transmitted repertoires of symbols that shape people’s perceptions of reality, and, at the same time, render that reality meaningful to them. The repertoire draws from the larger cultural tradition of Catholicism which allows for Catholics to pull from the rich tradition



even when they dissent from the meanings offered by the institutional church (Burns 1996; Dillon 2001). What brings both Griswold (2008) and Baggett's (2009) conceptions of culture together in this study is an emphasis on understanding shared meaning. The symbols and shared meanings of Catholicism and of the local parish shape how the parishioners of the parish understand their context today – shaped by their past and the larger tradition of Catholicism.

In her study of progressive Catholics, Dillon (2001) found that these Catholics do not passively accept institutional messages from the hierarchy, but instead produce cultural meanings that both maintain and challenge the tradition of Catholicism. Drawing from the tradition of Catholicism, members of St. Mary Magdalene have constructed a cultural story or *collective narrative*. Polletta (2006) argues that stories and narratives provide shared understandings: “in telling the story of our becoming... we define who we are” (12). Narratives are shaped by the larger institutional settings that they occur under (16) and they are shared by the members in the group. In defining the group, narratives as a component of culture provide the group a sense of meaning. A narrative formed at St. Mary Magdalene to define who they were becoming.

### **The Collective Narrative of St. Mary Magdalene Parish**

Upon first meeting with the current pastor to discuss the possibility for research, he quickly referenced the “all are welcome” narrative. He said that over the last few years St. Mary Magdalene solidified its mission and also its motto, “All Are Welcome.” This is the motto because St. Mary Magdalene is more open than other parishes. Here, St. Mary Magdalene stands as a parish that is accepting of all Catholics who struggle with the institutional church and may think of St. Mary Magdalene as the “last stop” before they

leave Catholicism. As my fieldwork developed, the narrative persisted in casual conversations with parishioners and staff, in bulletins and homilies produced by the priests and staff, and in the interviews I conducted with parishioners. All are Welcome and the accompanying social justice language was infused throughout the interviews.

While the Roman Catholic Church emphasizes the equal dignity and respect due to all persons (USCCB 2011), the hierarchy has also made statements condemning homosexual activity (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986) and forbidding the ordination of women (John Paul II 1994). For many of the parishioners at St. Mary Magdalene, these beliefs run contrary to the way they understand their faith, and as such, are angry and upset with the institutional church. I argue that St. Mary Magdalene Parish adopted a collective narrative as a progressive Catholic parish where all are welcome. Tenets of Catholic faith on the left of the spectrum are emphasized in the Church including an emphasis on nonviolence, helping the poor (both through charity and justice), and a commitment to thinking about our environmental impact on the world. Included in this narrative is a discussion of inclusion – including women and homosexual people who might feel alienated or oppressed by the institutional church. Through local organizational channels such as General Intercession prayers, homilies, and announcements in the bulletin, the parish priests and staff continue to promote a progressive collective narrative, one in which all are welcome at St. Mary Magdalene Parish.

To make something a narrative rather than just a component of the larger parish culture includes the telling of a story. At St. Mary Magdalene Parish, wrapped up in the discussion of the narrative is a *before* and *after* story of how the parish emerged as an All

are Welcome parish. Central to this discussion is the coming of Fr. Kavanaugh, and he marks the turning point for the parish story. Parishioners describe the parish as a regular Archdiocese of Chicago Parish before he came. For example, parishioner Dorian Spencer notes that the coming of Fr. Kavanaugh brought a “new angle” with him when he came to the Church. Erica said that when Fr. Kavanaugh came, “there was much more openness than ever before.” Similarly, long time parishioner Scott Reynolds said that the parish changed with the coming of Fr. Kavanaugh. What made this a story was the fact that long time parishioners could point to the coming of Fr. Kavanaugh as the turning point in the parish culture without my prompting of his name. Additionally, as evidenced in the excerpt from the Easter Vigil mass, the parish staff themselves tell of the changing culture with Fr. Kavanaugh. While the actual All are Welcome motto stems from the new pastor, Fr. Dennis, parishioners conceptualize the story as beginning with Fr. Kavanaugh, marking a qualitative difference from who they were before.

Even parishioners who did not witness the changing parish culture in the ‘80s recited the narrative to me during conversations in my fieldwork or in interviews I conducted. For example, when I spoke with the young adults group about the study, all of them knew that the parish had changed with Fr. Kavanaugh, despite the fact that most of them have only been at the parish since Fr. Dennis came. Additionally, many of the newer parishioners came because they knew of Fr. Kavanaugh and thus credit him for the culture that is here today. “I want to express my gratitude to St. Mary Magdalene’s,” said Dixie. “Fr. Kavanaugh really I think is part of this inclusive spirit. His many years in the parish really fostered many fine people committed to being church.”

Parish culture, however, is shared by the members. As Dillon (2001) found, the Catholic laity are not simply passively accepting institutional messages but are responding to them. From the perspective of Griswold's (2008) cultural diamond, the laity are active receivers – on the one hand, they receive messages from the parish leadership but in turn respond to the message contributing to the shared culture themselves. In adapting this shared meaning and contributing to the culture, the parishioners are constrained by the local parish and the greater institutional Catholic Church. The discussion of homosexuality at St. Mary Magdalene Parish and the larger Catholic Church, exemplify parishioners' attempts to shape the culture and in turn, the narrative.

### *Homosexuality*

The Catholic Church has taken a strong yet diplomatic stance to same sex orientation. While some Christian denominations and congregations adamantly hold that the orientation in and of itself is sinful, the Catholic Church only condemns acts of homosexuality. In other words, the acts are the sin, not the orientation (CCC 2357). Additionally, documents from the Vatican suggesting that homosexual behavior is “intrinsically disordered” refer to the Church's teaching that human sexuality is intrinsically ordered to procreation (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986). Yet, it is this middle position that the Catholics at St. Mary Magdalene are protesting.

In the 1990s, the neighborhood surrounding St. Mary Magdalene Parish experienced a growing number of same-sex couples and families. When one same-sex couple approached the parish school explaining that they were interested in purchasing a

home in the neighborhood only if their children could go to the school, they were met with an unconditional welcome. Parishioner Adam Wilson recalls the experience:

It goes back to 1994. My [same-sex] partner and I were out, and we had an adopted son. We decided it was time to move and were concerned about moving into the right parish. We heard that St. Mary Magdalene was a good parish to be a member of. So I called the principal of Regional Catholic Preparatory School and said, we have seen this house and this is a nice neighborhood. We are a gay couple, we have an adopted son and we don't want to buy the house and become members of the parish to have our son go to the school and have him be an object of ridicule. And she said that would not be a problem. That same year, Fr. Kavanaugh asked me to be a member of the parish council. We were told the parish would be accepting and it would be ok. And it was true.

As more same sex couples and single persons moved into the neighborhood, the Church evolved in its programs around homosexuality including a group called Gay Lesbian Outreach and Support (GLOS). Other programs were co-created by parishioners. For example, Dixie Walker, a lesbian woman and parishioner, describes a conversation the parish held about the Church's stance on homosexuality that occurred at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

There was some re-deliberation of how depraved I and all the gays are by the institutional church. Here at the parish we had a conversation, and people, I would say there were 150 people there, 200 people there. Largely supporters of gays and lesbians in the church, and so people, point after point sort of responded to what it means to them to authentically who they are to be Catholic. The tone of the conversation was love.

In this example, parishioners actively spoke of their opinions and feelings, including one who upheld the teaching of the Church on homosexuality. This parishioner, rather than be immediately dismissed, was listened to by the parishioners, and Dixie responded by saying that "loving her partner was not a sin." In an interview with the parishioner who spoke up, he had no hard feelings about the event, and instead said that he just wanted to be able to share his opinion. This was the only time that interviewees mentioned someone

in the parish actively spoke against homosexuality; interestingly enough, he was not marginalized but continues to be an active parishioner.

The St. Mary Magdalene Parishioners took their frustrations with homosexuality to the institutional church in mid 2000s. Upset with documents released by the Church about the “disorderedness” of homosexual acts, members of the Church organized a meeting with Cardinal George of the Chicago Archdiocese. Gathering a group together of both homosexual and heterosexual people, the group members had a conversation with the Cardinal. Edmund Scott explains, “one person would talk about the discovery of this particular orientation. The next would talk about what it was like to go through school, and the next would talk about relationships, and the next would talk about family. Finally, the last would talk about a deep desire to serve the Church as a lector and to give finances.” While the institutional Church position has not changed, Edmund and Adam both note that the Cardinal responded with empathy and active listening, and the parish has continued its acceptance of same-sex couples and families.

The example of homosexuality in the church community shows that parishioners respond to the messages from the larger Church, similar to Dillon’s (2001) argument. The official Church teaching argues that homosexual behavior is wrong and intrinsically disordered because it is not ordered towards procreation. St. Mary Magdalene Parishioners disagreed with this logic, arguing instead that homosexual relationships can be deemed a “right” expression of human sexuality, despite not literally being oriented towards procreation. Rejecting the Church’s position, they sought to create dialogue and welcome for gay Catholics in their local faith community. In turn, the priest and the staff work with the parishioners as shown in the example of the meeting with the Cardinal.

Shared in this is an understanding of the parish as marked by an overall openness. Erica Stone believes that this openness is what makes St. Mary Magdalene what it is: “I think the openness, and the All are Welcome. Well you know the Church’s stance on some things, gay people, and things like that is not very open. St Mary Magdalene’s is open, we are blessed with having gay couples and people who have adopted children of different racial groups, and everyone is welcome.” For St. Mary Magdalene Parishioners, this narrative of all are welcome and this value of openness permeates the parish and acts as the foundation of the parish culture and story.

### **The Importance of the Narrative**

I argue that the parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene wanted a progressive culture, and this was activated by parishioner Forrest Jackson and former pastor Sean Kavanaugh. Especially over the Kavanaugh years, the above progressive collective narrative emerged and continues to persist in the production of the mass, the eyes of the staff and priests, and the hearts of the lay parishioners. As a shared cultural collective narrative, it is influential for three reasons. Firstly, this narrative influences the parish political culture, the political and social projects the parish will adopt. Second, the narrative is reinforced by the parish leadership team and attracts parishioners to this specific parish. Finally, the collective narrative persists when projects run their course – in this case, people continue to identify St. Mary Magdalene as a progressive social justice Catholic parish even if a specific social justice event or committee disappears. In this way, the parish culture is able to persist through this narrative because parishioners accept and internalize the narrative.

*Influencing Parish Projects*

Baggett (2009) argues that Catholics “may find particular practices to be evocative and discard others they deem less so. And they may feel personally competent to draw upon or articulate some religious ideas while assuming that others are better left for Catholics of a different stripe” (33). I argue that at St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the collective narrative shapes and influences what projects are deemed relevant and resonate with the parishioners, staff, and priests. The story told at St. Mary Magdalene defines and limits what counts as fitting the narrative. For example, a large variation of projects have been adopted by parishioners, sponsored by staff, and continue in the parish today. A “GREEN Team” meets to think about ways to make the parish more environmentally sustainable, and to include the environment in the General Intercessions in Sunday’s Mass. The gym mass and folk music fit the progressive narrative, as do the lay run and led communal prayer services that act in the “spirit of Vatican II.” Peace marches around the neighborhood, interfaith work in the larger local community, and liturgical dance are allowed precisely because they are seen as liberal or progressive expressions of Catholicism. The cultural narrative, as a shared resource and understanding, provides the context for these projects to be actualized and accepted by members of the parish.

The narrative does constrain what is deemed acceptable or culturally relevant. In the introduction, I argued that Catholic Social Teaching begins with the belief in the dignity of all human life from conception to natural death. This thesis examines two manifestations of this tenet. Values around social justice can be said to flow out of this tenet of teaching, but one can easily argue anti-abortion work does as well. Indeed, St. Mary Magdalene does have a small anti-abortion contingent. Yet in all of my months of



field work, I have not seen a bulletin mention the Respect Life committee. When interviewing a member of the committee, I asked her to discuss her involvement in the parish. She responded by essentially confirming my suspicion of its small membership and inaction: “They [Respect Life issues] are not talked about at St. Mary Magdalene. I once talked to the [former] pastor one on one, and he said I cannot make a presentation about the value of life without offending someone who has had an abortion. That is how it was dismissed.” Respect Life advocacy was not endorsed by the pastor at the time, and as a consequence, sustained action around abortion did not persist in the parish. It is interesting to note here that despite being an “all are welcome” parish, some projects such as abortion, which do not fit into the narrative, have actual been “unwelcome” at the parish, as this Respect Life committee member identified.

As an alternative, however, parishioners found ways to discuss abortion that fit within the cultural narrative of St. Mary Magdalene. For example, Fr. Kavanaugh notes that the parish put on a play about a woman that had had an abortion.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Opal notes that the parish sponsored a conversation in which women who were pro life and pro choice met to find common ground. Rather than direct sustained action and advocacy, these programs brought people together for “increased understanding.” This increased understanding fits with the larger narrative of inclusivity, openness, and the spirit of the progressive Catholic parish. As a result, recognizing that their project would not be supported by the local church or the rest of the parishioners, the remaining members of

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the fact that the woman in the play actually had an abortion, the play was quite controversial in the larger Archdiocese and the Church forbid St. Mary Magdalene from actually showing the play. Fr. Kavanaugh took this story to the Chicago Tribune. As a consequence, St. Mary Magdalene partnered with another local Protestant church, performed the play at the other church, and started developing its interfaith neighborhood relations.

Respect Life have concluded that there is not much they can and will do with the ministry. For example, when I asked Opal how she understood and accepted the lack of support for Respect Life, she said that the Respect Life didn't fit what parishioners or the pastor wanted to do, and as such, she accepted that without too much protest and continued to stay active in the parish in other ways.

*Narrative as Reinforced by Parish Staff*

While I have argued that the parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene together have shaped the cultural collective narrative of the parish, the parish staff actively and regularly reinforces the narrative. For example, homilies in the parish often center around a social justice mission or cater to the liberal Catholics in the parish. Above I noted that the pastor of St. Mary Magdalene stated that St. Mary Magdalene is a last stop parish for many Catholics. As a consequence, he and the staff are cognizant that these Catholics are *fragile*<sup>3</sup> and that any actions on the part of the church leaders may prompt these Catholics to leave. Homilies focus on messages of love and Catholic issues are framed in ways that are inclusive and non divisive; this way, people, especially fragile people, do not feel excluded and offended, but instead feel welcomed and accepted by the local parish community.

One example of this is a homily given about the Annual Catholic Appeal. Each year, diocese and Archdioceses across the country calculate the size of their parishes and then set amount of money that each parish must fundraise to the “Annual Catholic Appeal” (ACA) or Archdiocesan fund. In this way, it is similar to a tax mandated by a

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<sup>3</sup> This term *fragile* was used by Fr. Dennis when I approached him to research the parish. He used the term to refer specifically to the fact that St. Mary Magdalene Parish is a last stop parish. This awareness shapes the ways the pastor and staff relate to the parishioners. I use the word in this section because it is how he and the staff members understand many of the parishioners of the parish.

municipality. In my own experience of ACAs across the country, parishes ask members to speak about the “joys and graces of sacrifices” for the ACA. Here, at St. Mary Magdalene, however, Fr. Dennis framed the issue quite differently.

During the homily that Sunday, he began by saying that this is a hard thing he must do each year and that he knows that people know what this means. “I understand some of those concerns,” he says, discussing how he recognizes that some are upset with the institutional church. He notes that he knows some are struggling to make ends meet, and want to say this to the Archdiocese, but mentions that today’s Gospel reading calls us to trust where our money and resources will come from. “Some of us angry about how the church is treating women, but each of us is important regardless of gender and each of us by virtue of our baptism has a right to preach and proclaim the Gospel. The ACA will support lay ministries” He then adds, “We might say, I am gay or lesbian and feel isolated and hurt by statements from the Church... God will bring to life what is hidden and everyone will receive praise, and the ACA will promote dignity of every person and every life. Drawing on statements of inclusivity and a Gospel of love, Fr. Dennis recognizes that the challenges and frustrations his parishioners face with the larger Church are real, but invites them to understand their church as part of a larger church.

In this way, the staff and priests of the church recognize the legitimacy the narrative has in the eyes of the parishioners. Knowing that their parishioners are fragile and may potentially leave if prompted by more hurt and frustration with the Church, the staff reifies and makes use of the narrative to build support in the parish. In the example of the ACA, I heard a woman next to me say immediately after the homily, “He really

said the right things. I haven't given to this in years." She said that as she put \$10 in the ACA envelope and handed it to the usher.

*Collective Narrative Persists*

Perhaps most important is that the shared meaning attached to the collective narrative persists after parishioners, staff members, and priests are reassigned, move on, or pass away. For example, the Social Justice committee has stopped meeting, but the parish continues to see itself as a progressive Catholic parish committed to social justice, and indeed, the examples provided above show that the parishioners and staff continue to perpetuate this message. Similarly, the narrative allows for innovation of projects and programs that fit the storyline and shared meaning of the culture. An example of this is in the Communal Prayer Services now offered at St. Mary Magdalene Parish. As described below, these prayer services came about after a) the end of the parish lay preaching team and b) the death of a parishioner who had been excommunicated. Both of these incidents were the result of unwanted Archdiocesan action in the parish, and the parish established these services in response to their frustrations with the Archdiocese.

According to parishioners, one of the hallmarks of St. Mary Magdalene Parish was an innovation by Sean Kavanaugh: he instituted a lay preaching team made up of both women and men to give the homily during Catholic masses so that they could showcase the rich speaking abilities and faith experiences of lay parishioners. From the perspective of the parish, everyone benefitted. The priest said fewer homilies, parishioners selected for the lay preaching team were able to develop and give testimonies of their faith, and parishioners in the pews heard a diversity of well written and spoken homilies each week. However, parishioners recount how the Archbishop

insisted that with the new pastor, the lay preaching team be dismantled because it violated some form of canon law.

Connected to the lay preaching story was the story of a woman in the parish who decided to pursue ordination in the Women Priests movement. At the same time, this same woman developed cancer and began to die. When she was ordained in the movement, the official Catholic Church excommunicated her and she soon died from her cancer. The Archdiocese firmly stated that because she had been excommunicated, she could not be buried in the church. Hurt by the response of the Archdiocese, these members formed lay led communal prayer services as a response. When I asked Adam Wilson how they started, he responded,

After the funeral, we are hurt, we are tired of this nonsense with the Archdiocese, so I am like, we can't let her die in vain. We started to meet to figure out what are the things we are going to do. One, we met with the Cardinal and tell him what we think, we did that. Two, we are going to somehow get this preaching back up and running. If they [the Archdiocese] won't let us do it on a Sunday, then we are going to do it during the week. So that is what we do. All it really is an opportunity for lay preaching – you hear the word, beautiful music, there is a communion service. Is it ideal? No I'd rather have the lay preaching team back.

Other parishioners have characterized these lay run prayer services in the spirit of Vatican II, an active manifestation of lay involvement and participation in the liturgy and parish life. For parishioners who feel alienated by the institutional church because of the issue with woman priests, here parishioners feel welcomed and accepted which is the goal and message of the parish narrative. .

These prayer services offer an example of the ways the parish narrative is used and persists after programs die. Not only do parishioners reference previous programs, such as the lay preaching team, that fit into the narrative, but they then continue to use the

narrative to craft additional programs like the lay run communion services. In this way, the narrative allows the progressive culture to persist by lasting longer than programs, and continually influencing which projects are selected. Thus, the narrative is important because it frames what counts as relevant to the parishioners, staff, and is used by lay and religious members to continue to promote the “all are welcome” narrative.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that St. Mary Magdalene Parish developed a shared parish culture, a cultural collective narrative welcoming all into their parish, centered around a spirit of openness. I argued that the desire for a more open parish with increased lay involvement already existed in the parish but was activated by in the 1980s specifically by Forrest Jackson and Sean Kavanaugh. While Sean Kavanaugh’s influence can be still felt today, the parishioners themselves have not been passive receivers of programs or projects from the staff and priests; instead, they have contributed their own perspectives and taken action to form the All are Welcome parish cultural collective narrative that persists. I have also argued that this narrative permits the All are Welcome shared meaning to persist by influencing what type of projects are deemed relevant and resonate with parishioners and is in turn reinforced by the parish staff and priests who perpetuate the message. Finally, I argued that the narrative persist when programs end because this narrative continues to be shared by parishioners and staff. At St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the narrative has become a sort of “worldview” that serves a function in own right, apart from this or that particular program.

CHAPTER THREE

BUILDING A CULTURE OF LIFE: REFORMING THE MORAL DISCOURSE AT

ST. PIUS PARISH

*God is the author of life. In him we place our trust and hope as we pray: for those who do not embrace the rights of the unborn that, in love, they come to know the dignity of every person in the eyes of God, we pray to the Lord...*

The congregation is kneeling as they respond to the prayer with the words, “Lord hear our prayer.” The church is gathered together in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in a golden monstrance displaying the bread. St. Pius’s Holy Hour for Life continues with a series of petitions, in which, together, the twenty gathered in the church pray for legislators, for the elderly, for those preparing for marriage, and for “all the victims of the culture of death.” Next, is the recitation of the Rosary, with each decade of the Rosary led by a different member of the congregation. An accompanying Scripture passage is read, and the Rosary is followed by the “Litany of Life,” a series of prayers calling for the protection of the vulnerable in the world. Finally, the deacon holds up the monstrance, using it to make a sign of the cross, and everyone gathered makes the sign of the cross personally. He places the host back in the Tabernacle, and the prayer service concludes with a prayer proclaiming that God, Jesus, and the great Mother of God are blessed.

This is an excerpt from St. Pius’s annual January Holy Hour for Life, a Catholic prayer service dedicated each year around the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, calling for the end of abortion. This version of Catholic worship is in contrast to St. Mary Magdalene in content and in form. Rather than singing songs of how all are welcome into the church,

members of the Respect Life committee planned a *Holy Hour* drawing explicitly from pious practices of Catholicism. The goals are twofold. On the one hand, the focus is on praying for the end to abortion. Secondly, from conversations and interviews with the committee members, there is a hope that through programs like the Holy Hour, they will grow in their faith as Roman Catholics, and this is clear from the Latin songs, adoration of the Eucharist, and reciting of the Rosary. Yet, it is important to take note of the fact that despite weeks of advertising in the bulletin and announcements at mass, fewer than twenty people are present and a majority are on the actual committee. Can this be called shared parish culture? Perhaps, instead, it is merely a small group of members trying to influence the parish.

The ministry of the Respect Life group cannot be deemed as the “culture of the parish” in the same way that St. Mary Magdalene parishioners share the same collective narrative. Rather, the members of the Respect Life committee are attempting to influence the culture discourse around life and moral issues, and are trying to promote the truths of Catholicism’s teachings on life. In this way, they hope to build a “culture of life” in the parish. Because this chapter is focused on the Respect Life group and their attempts to build a culture of life, I will not outline a general history of the parish like I did for St. Mary Magdalene Parish. Instead, I begin by giving a brief history of how the group unfolded. They quickly adopted four main aims: education; prayer; legislation; and ministerial outreach. I argue that as the group expanded in their four aims, they drew heavily from the institutional tools of the Church and explicitly formed a partnership with the Archdiocese Respect Life office and the greater Catholic Church. As the work expanded, Respect Life members grew in a quest for truth, leading them deeper into the



tradition of Catholicism. Believing they found the truth in Catholicism, the committee is seeking to do more than end abortion – they are trying to reframe the *moral discourse* of the parish into one that embraces the orthodoxy of Catholicism.

### **Forming the Respect Life Parish Group**

The current pastor, Fr. David Lord, arrived to St. Pius Parish in 2005 after the previous pastor had declared that he was leaving the priesthood. Fr. David, a priest who is deeply loved by all parishioners I interviewed, started the Respect Life group in 2005. In my interview with him, Fr. David said that the group emerged because the Archdiocese had wanted more Respect Life groups in parishes across Chicago, and he saw a few people who had expressed interest in the group. At the very beginning, members joined for one of two reasons. When I asked parishioner JR Richardson how he got involved with Respect Life, he answered, “Well, Fr. David wanted a group to get going, and he asked me and I said we were looking for people to run it.” In contrast, Bianca Montgomery, a lifelong parishioner in her fifties, recounts that she had a conversion experience around abortion and euthanasia in 2005. Her daughter brought paperwork home from her Catholic high school discussing the ways abortions are conducted, and Bianca was tuned into the Terri Shivo euthanasia controversy that was in the media. Realizing the gravity of the life issues in the world, she noticed an invitation to join the newly found group: “One day I went to mass and then they had a little thing to fill out and it said get involved and it had a list of all the different activities and ministries. I looked down the list and saw Respect Life, and I was like, when did this happen? That was a new group, and I got a phone call from Vickie Buchannan [the coordinator] and that was December of 2005.”

Working together over the next few months, the group designed a logo and had a banner made by parishioner Kendall Curtis, a woman who is involved in many other aspects of the parish. The committee also worked on brochures to advertise their committee and drafted the following mission statement to guide their work:

The Respect Life Committee of St. Pius Parish is resolved to serve the people of God by working to promote a respect for all human life from conception to a natural death. We are dedicated to speaking the truth in love through both education and action. We support and welcome the work of the Respect Life Office [of the Archdiocese of Chicago] and bring its initiatives of prayer, education, legislative action, and ministerial outreach to St. Pius.

Following the lead of the Archdiocese of Chicago Respect Life Office, and drawing specifically from resources available to parishes, committee members focused on the four initiatives already set forth by the Archdiocese. This partnership remains crucial to the group, as they continue to gather resources from the Office and work on projects that originate from the Archdiocesan office.

Currently, some of the events sponsored by the local St. Pius group include the sponsoring of the Women's Center (a Catholic pregnancy center that encourages women to consider alternatives to abortion), letter and email campaigns to legislators of Illinois and Congress, prayer vigils outside of an abortion clinic, and a prayer shawl ministry to promote the dignity of those enduring sickness and those nearing death. The group engages in at least fifteen different types of activities falling under the four priorities of prayer, legislative action, education, and ministerial outreach. While it is impossible to detail all events, I will give a brief discussion of some of the education attempts, the outreach through the spiritual adoption, and the prayer shawl ministry.

*Education*

Similar to Bianca Montgomery, parishioners like Bo and Nora Brown experienced an awakening to the Church's teachings on life and sexuality, and became actively involved with the Respect Life committee. As a consequence, for committee members, educating other parishioners about the Church's teachings has been crucial for members. For example, when I first started attending St. Pius parish, I noticed a wide variety of brochures in the back and sides of the Church about life issues including abortion, the death penalty, contraception, pornography, chastity, and caring for the elderly. Bianca purchases many of these brochures from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops. Bianca also works weekly on a column that runs in the parish bulletin every week about the workings of the Respect Life group. These range from cartoons of babies developing in the womb, advertisements of upcoming events for parishioners to get involved in, and announcements of federal, state, and local policies and court proceedings that violate the Church's teachings on life and sexuality.

Additionally, Bo works with Fr. David, the school board and the principal to infuse teachings of Respect Life in weekly packets that go home to parents of the school's children. After Bo came to perceive that the school was teaching a watered-down Catholicism, he and the committee designed handouts for parents to discuss. Describing the content of the handouts, he says, "there might be a teaching on sexuality, euthanasia, a counter lesson on the culture of death, and it gives a couple of questions for Mom and Dad to raise. You know, you are educating and catechizing two generations at once." Trying to be creative, the committee has included song lyrics about life issues like abortion and aging, reflection questions, and quotes from popes and other Catholic

leaders. The committee has designed twenty total handouts which were approved by the pastor and school principal and have been sent home to educate parents and students about the life issues with the hope that a new culture of life will emerge.

### *Spiritual Adoption*

The Spiritual Adoption program was added to the outreach of the Respect Life committee as an attempt to link prayer and contributions to the Women's Pregnancy Center with parishioners of the parish. As Bo describes it, the program "gives an opportunity for clergy to preach about the truth of human life around March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Annunciation, it engages the community by bringing the Annunciation to life, and it is very pragmatic." Around March 25<sup>th</sup> each year, parishioners are invited to "adopt" a baby from the women's center and pray for the baby and mother through the term of the pregnancy. Because the pregnancy begins on March 25<sup>th</sup>, it is assumed that like Jesus, the baby is born on or around December 25<sup>th</sup>. Reminders in the weekly Respect Life bulletin column, such as the unborn child cartoons, serve as persistent cues and calls for prayer. The group is currently working to expand this project to have specific classrooms adopt an unborn baby, as well as send reminders to school families through the weekly packets.

In November or December, the prayer culminates in a baby shower hosted at the parish. Respect Life members invite parishioners to bring in items for the new baby which will be donated to the Women's center. During the 2011 baby shower, which I attended, committee members displayed the prayer shawls (described below), brochures about the ministry and life issues including contraception and natural family planning, and provided cake and punch. In total, the committee estimates that they were able to

purchase 800 diapers from the monetary contributions, and the group was very impressed with the quantity of items that were donated as well. From the vantage point of the Respect Life committee members, the project engages parishioners in long-term prayer efforts and social outreach to the women at the Women's Center.

### *Prayer Shawl Ministry*

After experiencing an illness and receiving a prayer shawl from a friend outside of the parish, committee member Greenlee Gilmore, a long time parishioner in her sixties, approached the Respect Life committee with the suggestion that they might start their own prayer shawl ministry as part of their own ministerial outreach: "I brought it up at Respect Life, and everyone agreed. Right for Life is not only for newborns but also for the end of life, people in stress, and people having a hard time, you know, with diseases." For members on the committee, the prayer shawl ministry fits into their mission because it works for those who are defined as vulnerable – the sick and the dying; because they are human and vulnerable, it is important to extend human dignity to them as well.

Started in March 2010, the group of women gathers twice a month in the parish senior center to knit and crochet shawls and blankets that are blessed by the priests twice a year and given to people in need of prayers. During the meeting time, as the women knit and crochet, they talk about their faith and offer prayers for those people who have received the shawls and blankets. When I asked her how many shawls have been made, Greenlee said that over 400 have been made in the last two years, and the committee has given away about 200.

### **Defining Respect Life**

The Catholic Church teaching that frames the Respect Life Group is the belief that all humans are entitled to dignity and respect, and that all are called to ensure this dignity (USCCB 2011). The mission statement of the group, as described above, centers on this tenet of Catholic Social Teaching as the group strives to protect life from “conception to natural death.” In addition to work around abortion, the group formed the Prayer Shawl Ministry to aid those who are sick and vulnerable. Additionally, the group sponsors a “Respect Life” essay contest for junior high students – students are invited to respond to either of the two prompts, (a) “How do I know that my life is precious” or (b) “What is a challenge of being a Catholic today?” During the course of my fieldwork, two students were selected as winners of the contest and received a monetary prize from the group.

Yet, when viewing a list of the various activities sponsored by the group, most activities and prayer ministries fail to stray too far from the topic of abortion. For some in the group, there is some discussion about expanding the definition. The motto calls for protecting natural death, and the group has defined this as the vulnerable elderly who are sick. During my field work, the group discussed adding projects around domestic violence as well as protecting life by defending the Church against the Obama Administration’s mandate that Catholic institutions carry contraception on their health insurance plans.

For many in the group, reflecting on the Church’s teachings is what prompts them to expand their definition of Respect Life. Bianca told me she reflected on the Church’s teachings on death penalty, altering her previous support for death penalty:

We also cover the death penalty. You know I had to research the death penalty and the Catholic Church's position on it, because I always thought that you were tried and found guilty, you deserve death. Then I read the Catechism of the Catholic Church and I also read that Pope John Paul II was against the death penalty but only in cases where we would be able to protect society. Well we are able to put somebody in high security, we have the technology, so there is no reason for the death penalty these days. I then thought, Respect Life, conception to natural death, I was reading we have to give these people the chance to reconcile, to repent and be reconciled and that turned my whole thinking around.

In this example, just as Bianca found truth in the teachings on abortion from the Church, she also found the teachings on death penalty as true and gained a deeper trust in the Church. Additionally, in an interview with the coordinator of Respect Life, Vickie Buchannan, she spoke of her own attempts to expand the definition.

I would like to include immigration in our list of Respect Life. We were all immigrants at some point and we should respect the rights of immigrants who come here I keep telling Fr. David we need to include this in the bulletin as a Respect Life issue.... I also believe that there is a lot of life between the birth of a baby and death. That is why my husband and I are involved in St. Vincent de Paul at St. Pius Parish, trying to help poor people. This is included in Respect Life.

Thus, for both Bianca and Vickie, Respect Life was much more than the single issue of abortion, reflecting the Church's complex teachings, and the two were committed to expanding the definition in the work that the committee undertook.

Time and resources was a large constraint for the group to expand their efforts. Every committee member I spoke with wanted to expand and do more than they were already doing but recognized that they only had so many resources. For example, Bo discussed wanting to expand the school packets program but then added, "I don't have that time to do it like I would like to." Similarly, Greenlee Gilmore adds that the size of the group has been a challenge to adding to what the group does: "we are trying to keep up on current issues that affect Right to Life and in our parish, but we are a small group."

Thus, many on the committee wanted to expand the definition of respect life to include the comprehensive list of Catholic Church teachings, but felt constrained because they did not have more members to develop the additional projects.

Taken together, parishioners on the Respect Life ministry actively work to educate the rest of the parish about the life issues at stake, and work to support the Women's Center in both concrete and abstract ways (the baby shower and spiritual adoption, respectively). Additionally, they write and email legislators, travel with other Catholics from the Archdiocese to Springfield, IL and Washington, DC to protest against issues of life, and put on events such as the Holy Hour described at the beginning of the chapter. To accomplish this work, they rely explicitly on tools derived from the tradition of Catholicism. Resources for programming and handouts are drawn from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops and ideas from the Archdiocese of Chicago. The prayer described above pulls from Catholic litanies, Eucharistic adoration, and the Rosary. In the quest to understand the truth of life teachings, and to communicate this truth through their projects, Bianca told me that the Archdiocese has been a crucial aid for the group. Knowing that the truth comes from the tradition of Catholicism, these Respect Life committee members trust the resources of Catholicism and turn to the institutional faith when they need clarification or additional resources. This way, the work they do not only promotes the truth of life issues, but also aids the Respect Life members in their own journey of faith as Roman Catholics.

### **Parish Culture or a Small Group?**

The Holy Hour, education programs, spiritual adoption, and prayer shawl ministry described are a mere sampling of the larger quantity of projects and efforts that the



committee engages in each month and year. While it is clear that the people of the St. Pius Respect Life committee are actively working to promote a culture of life in a multiplicity of ways, it is unclear that this can be deemed as the “culture” of the parish. In my discussion of St. Mary Magdalene Parish, I used Griswold (2008) and Baggett’s (2009) definitions of culture which focus on shared symbols, values, practices, and ideas that stand for a commonly held shared meaning. For St. Mary Magdalene parishioners, I argued that they established a collective cultural narrative that is shared by parishioners, staff, and priests, and continues to influence the work of the parish.

At St. Pius Parish, the above examples suggest that committee members do hold the values of the “culture of life” in common and are engaging in shared practices and efforts to promote these values in the parish and the wider church and society. These values include an emphasis on protecting the unborn, the pregnant, and the elderly, those that they deem as vulnerable in society. By participating together in monthly meetings, baby showers, spiritual adoption projects, holy hours, prayer outside the local abortion clinic, and the many other projects and prayers, these members clearly have established a culture for their group of ten members.

For example, when Bo described the culture of life to me in more detail, he said that members of the committee all share the same perspective and values: “You know, you are not going to get any arguments in the room at a Respect Life ministry about the validity of the teaching of the Theology of the Body. You might get in a discussion about how best to pass it along, but that is it.” The starting point is the same, that is, a belief in the need for the culture of life stemming from the truths of Catholicism and the writings of Pope John Paul II, who wrote the Theology of the Body teachings in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

These teachings come out of a Natural Moral Law framework and beginning with the story of Creation in Genesis, track the unfolding of human life and sexuality (West 2004). Theology of the Body, thus, grounds the work that the Respect Life Group does, and argues that society must move towards a culture of life. The Respect Life group meets to grow deeper in their commitment in these truths and values, and form practical ways to spread these values throughout their parish community.

Yet the fact that they only have ten members, and that they have not been able to attract new members is telling. Marissa Jones, a woman in her forties with many new ideas for the committee, noted that the group is still trying to figure out how to gain more members: “We are still trying to find out what works. We still have the challenge of people not knowing what Respect Life is.” Similarly, Greenlee notes that she sees the group as “a small group trying to grow to involve the parish. We haven’t been able to get a lot of new members, but the group has gotten more involved in different aspects and are doing different things.” The group is self-reflexive, as they strategize how to grow in both numbers and in commitment from the parish. They recognize that their shared small group values may not permeate the whole parish yet.

Similarly, when I interviewed parishioners outside the committee, many were not fully aware of the work the committee was doing. One parishioner, Tad Johnson, was unaware that the group was strong at St. Pius Parish. This is exemplified in his statement, “There is some center that hands out baby bottles and that has been going on for a few years, but quite honestly, I don’t pay a lot of attention to that. I don’t know, has your research found that it is very strong here?” Similarly, Amanda Simpson, an active parishioner in her thirties, notes that the Respect Life group has grown since Fr. David

arrived at the parish, and particularly, that she knew that Bo and Nora Brown were on the committee, but that was the extent to her knowledge. This theme is echoed in Kendall, the very active parishioner who made the banner for Respect Life, who adds that all she knows about Respect Life is that it became active “about five years ago.”

As the pastor of the parish, Fr. David helped start the Respect Life Group 2005 when it became clear that that Archdiocese wanted additional Respect Life Groups in parishes. When I asked him about the group’s progress, he said that he tries to push them to think of more issues besides abortion: “For example, I think that domestic violence and war are respect life issues,” he said. He also noted that some people have a narrow vision for the prayer services and that the Holy Hour style does not resonate with the average parishioner; this, he believes is part of the reason the group has struggled to gain additional membership and influence the greater culture of the parish. Finally, to further illustrate my point, when I told Fr. David that I would be passing out programs at the Respect Life Holy Hour in January, he told me not to expect more than fifteen or twenty people to come for the prayer service. He was right. These comments from very active parishioners as well as the pastor suggest that perhaps this Respect Life “culture of life,” as defined by the committee members, is not really a shared culture across the entire parish, but is limited to members of the committee only.

### **Reforming the Moral Discourse**

Based on my ethnography and interviews, I cannot conclude that the parish culture is one akin to the “culture of life” that the Respect Life committee is attempting to promote. However, the very fact that the committee is promoting this culture is the key finding. I arrived at St. Mary Magdalene Parish once the cultural narrative had been

already established in the community. It is known by existing parishioners, and new parishioners learn the narrative when they arrive in the parish. Here, however, I observed the process of one group attempting to refashion the moral cultural discourse of the parish from one that they deemed as the “culture of death” to the “culture of life” as defined by the larger teachings of Pope John Paul II. From the vantage point of the Respect Life members, their job is to be faithful to the Gospel message of life and to educate others who have not learned the truth that Catholicism offers. The prayer and programs they plan flow from this sincere commitment to pass on these truths to the rest of the parishioners at their parish as does their action. Just as they believe the Holy Hours will cultivate a culture of life inside the parish, so they believe their ministry with the local Women’s Center and the collection of items will foster a recognition of the dignity of life for all, starting at conception.

For example, Nora Buchannan recognizes that not everyone will look at the pamphlets that are put out and that “it is hard to tell how people in the pews feel about it.” Yet, when Fr. David spoke about abortion during his homily, she was deeply pleased, stating that “you need to understand what is really done in abortion. There’s a limit on what you can do to educate people at our parish... it’s really tricky, how to educate them besides giving them pamphlets.” After seeing what he believes is the horror of the watered down Catholicism in schools like St. Pius Catholic School, Bo Buchannan sees his job as planting seeds of a better Catholicism. For him, the local parish and the world is full of a culture of death, “the materialistic and utilitarian devaluing of human dignity, [in contrast to the culture of life] from the teachings of John Paul II.” Noting the committee’s desire to build the culture of life, he notes,

And that is difficult to do, it is very countercultural. It is not impossible, but it is a changing of hearts, really changing hearts. Who knows? Right now there is a family somewhere in the neighborhood and they've got this spiritual adoption card on their refrigerator, and there is a nine year old child in the family that is really engaged in this. You know, it might make all of the difference in the world ten years from now. They may not be swallowed up by the lies of the culture of death.

From Bianca's vantage point, parishioners have been very supportive of ministries such as the prayer shawl ministry, the baby shower, and the baby bottle project: "little by little, people are getting involved at their own time, you know you can't just pull people in and say, do it. But I think in their own time more people are getting involved." For committee members like Bianca, Nora and Bo, it is not clear how the messages are being received, but they are hopeful that they are planting the seeds for a changing culture.

From the vantage point of parishioners I talked with not involved in the committee, it is clear that some of them have been thinking more about Respect Life issues over the last months, especially given the Catholic Church's opposition to the Obama Administration's proposal that Catholic hospitals and universities be required to carry contraception on their health insurance plans. Despite Amanda telling me she knows little about the Respect Life group, she then later says, "You know, it is funny, now that you mention it, lately I have been thinking more about life issues than I ever had. Respect life, the things we pray about in church and the functions they do come to mind more often, especially with the HHS issue. I have been thinking that maybe I should go to one of those Respect Life meetings and see what they are doing."

The projects that the Respect Life committee engages in seek to build a new discourse in the parish, one that ushers in an understanding of the greater truths of Catholicism, focused in human life and sexuality. For Nora, who returned to her faith

later in life, she has found truth in the orthodoxy of Catholicism, especially on teaching of sexuality and life. Similarly, when Bianca discovered the tragedies of abortion, her eyes were opened to the rich teachings of the Church. Bo notes that these beliefs are shared by committee members, and indeed, I observed discussion of the truths of Catholicism centered in human sexuality and life, and the desire of the committee members to most effectively communicate these to parishioners. In doing so, they are attempting to reformulate the culture of death into a culture of life. Recognizing that this takes time and patience, they see their role as planting and sowing seeds. Members like Amanda and Tad are confronted with the issues when they open the bulletin, listen to periodic sermons, and see brochures in the back of the parish. They may ignore them like Tad, or they may find themselves thinking about the issues more like Amanda has. While these are the only two examples of non-Respect Life parishioners I spoke with who have voiced an opinion about the work of the Respect Life group, the group continues to believe that they are making some impact on the parish: It is the hope of the committee that Amanda's experience is not just anecdotal, but a window into a larger trend at the parish. To continue to pointing to the truths of Catholicism as they understood them, the committee continues to meet, pray, protest outside the abortion clinic, restock their flyers, continue with their weekly column in the bulletin, to promote life through handouts in parish school weekly packets, make and distribute prayer shawls, and continue fostering events that connect the parish with the Women's Center. Over time, they believe, the moral discourse of the parish will change, and they will have a culture of life established as the primary parish culture of St. Pius.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONSCIENCE, CULTURE AND CHURCH: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In chapter two, I argued that St. Mary Magdalene Parish established a parish culture where all are welcome, and in particular, inviting to gay and lesbian people. In contrast, I argued in chapter three that the St. Pius Parish Respect Life Ministry formed a shared understanding around the Church's teachings on life and sexuality, and has since attempted to reform the moral cultural discourse of the parish to conform to the "culture of life." What is common to both parishes is an attempt to negotiate differing truths about Catholicism. For the two parishes in this study, parish culture was the manifestation of the process of "contesting truth" for these Catholics. The parish provided the place for these Catholics to come together and negotiate truth, both individually and collectively. On the individual level, the Catholics in my study responded to the Church's call to form their conscience (USCCB 2011). On the collective level, the parish was the place where these Catholics negotiated these consciences, and made decisions about the truths of Catholicism. At St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the result of these collective reflections was an "all are welcome" parish culture. In contrast, at St. Pius Parish, it was an attempt by the Respect Life group to redefine the moral cultural discourse of the parish into a "culture of life."

For St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the hard contestations and negotiation around parish culture had already occurred before I had arrived. Dating back to the 1980s, when Fr. Kavanaugh joined the parish and the parish began to welcome more parishioners from

the neighborhood, the parish established their reputation as an all are welcome parish.

While the parish culture and narrative had already been solidified when current pastor Fr. Dennis came to the parish, he brought his love of the song *All are Welcome*, and the parish officially has claimed it as their theme song. Furthermore, Ryan Quartermaine, a gay parishioner in his fifties moved to the neighborhood because he was looking for a new parish and had heard from friends that St. Mary Magdalene was known for being gay friendly. Thus, it was the reputation as a gay-friendly parish that ultimately made Ryan purchase a home in the neighborhood. Similarly, in an interview with Rebecca Perry, a young adult in her 30s, she told me that her roommate and she were looking for an open community and saw St. Mary Magdalene as “a very queer friendly parish which was very important to both my roommate and I.”

While parishioners, new and old, may have accepted the collective narrative at St. Mary Magdalene, the parish is still negotiating with the truths of Catholicism in two specific ways. On the one hand, accepting the narrative, parishioners ask whether they really are an *all are welcome* parish. Edmund, a staff member at the parish expressed this clearly in our interview: “We ask the question constantly, what does it mean? You know, all are welcome, what does that mean? Does anybody belong here? What does welcome look like?” When I asked Edmund to clarify how they’ve answered the question, he responded by saying, “So you know, all are welcome, I’ve got daughters who say, ‘I am not welcome. I can’t be a priest.’” Many other parishioners expressed concern about the all are welcome motto in a similar vein. In calling for “inclusive prayer,” Dixie, a lesbian woman articulated similar thoughts: “So, we say, it’s a song we sing *All are Welcome*. We have an All are Welcome concert you know, and again rules of the Church really



don't support the all are welcome. Gay and lesbians are welcome... people who are divorced are not welcome... people who want to talk about women in the church aren't welcome..." Additionally, as discussed in chapter two, pro life activism was not welcome at St. Mary Magdalene Parish because former pastor Fr. Kavanaugh told the committee he could not talk about abortion in the parish because it would make some people feel unwelcome. Taken together, parishioners accept the message all are welcome, but are skeptical of whether they truly are welcome, given the constraints of the greater Catholic Church.

As a consequence, the second source of contestation is not within St. Mary Magdalene, but it is directed at the Archdiocese of Chicago. From the perspective of the St. Mary Magdalene Parishioners, it is the Archdiocese (and greater Catholic Church) who hurts gay and lesbian people, excludes women from being involved in ministry, and crushes local parish innovation outside the standard "envelope" of Catholicism. Many parishioners referenced a clamp down of discussion on women's ordination following the excommunication of a former parishioner Sabrina Nottingham who was ordained in the Woman Priest movement. When she died of cancer soon after, the Archdiocese refused to let her have her funeral in the parish. Parishioners responded with hurt and confusion. Because this was so salient, Fr. Dennis informed me of the incident during our first encounter when I asked to do the study. Over the course of the study, parishioners informed me of meeting with the Cardinal to discuss their hurt about Sabrina's excommunication and death. Furthermore, a group of parishioners organized a memorial for her at the parish during the course of my fieldwork and some continue to host communal prayer services at the parish. While it is clear that there is contestation over

truth and Church teachings that the parish continues to work through as they negotiate their consciences, the hard work of forming the narrative is over. Now, while the narrative persists, most parishioners direct any frustrations at the Archdiocese and larger Catholic Church.

For parishioners in the Respect Life group of St. Pius Parish, the contestation is with the larger society and is around life and sexuality issues. The Respect Life members developed a shared value around the Church's life teachings. Realizing that the Church possesses the truth on these teachings, the group has been actively trying to redefine the moral cultural discourse of the parish, creating norms and cultural values that are consistent with a "culture of life" perspective. Drawing from the teachings of the Church, the tools provided from the Respect Life ministry, and greater orthodox Catholic sources, the group stays faithful to the truth they have found, believing that the truth has come from God.

### **Two Visions of Truth**

When I began this study, I conceptualized St. Mary Magdalene as a "social justice parish" based on their self-description in their bulletins and parish handouts, and St. Pius Parish as a "respect life" parish based on the recommendation from the Archdiocese of Chicago. What emerged, however, was two parishes in pursuit of truth, resulting in two differing conceptions of truth stemming from the Church's teachings on life and sexuality. For Catholics at St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the truth is contrary to the Church's teachings: homosexual relationships are conceived of by parishioners as more

than acceptable, and women's ordination is called for.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Respect Life members at St. Pius Parish believe truth about human life and sexuality rests ultimately in the deep theological and philosophical teachings of the post John Paul II Church.

While this study thus far has recounted how the parishes have developed cultures around these issues, I argue that the deeper question around truth stems from the fact that these churches both did exactly what the church told them to do: they pursued and followed their own moral consciences. Acting on experience and agency, these parishioners drew from their faith to create their respective parish and group cultures. It was their experience that led them closer towards or further away from certain Church teachings, especially on life and sexuality. At St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the experiences were ones of seeing gay and lesbian as normal, experiencing the welcoming attitude of the parish, and recognizing neighborhood change and welcome that as well. As a result, values negotiated in the consciences of the parishioners, manifested themselves in the shared values of the parish as a whole. Thus, the narrative developed and continues to be told by and relearned by parishioners. These parishioners believe they have found truth, but it is contrary to the official position of the Church. As such, despite institutional constraints on the local and Archdiocesan level, these active parishioners are committed to living out the new truths that they have found.

But members of the Respect Life Group acted on their agency and experiences as well. Realizing the horrors of abortion, Bianca dove deeper into the Church's teachings on life and sexuality, and ultimately found peace in the Church's authority. Lacking a

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<sup>1</sup> As a point of clarification, the priests in this study never issued statements that contradicted the Church's teachings, especially on the issues of homosexuality and women's ordination. Rather, recognizing the complexity of the issue as well as the official teachings of the Catholic Church, the message of the priests focused on the narrative, that all should be welcomed into the Church regardless of sexual orientation.

sense of meaning in their lives, Bo and Nora returned to the parish and became active in different projects and programs. They were drawn to Respect Life and experiencing the group's shared values helped them dive deeper into their faith as Catholics. After doing research on the Women's Center, Marissa decided to begin donating and eventually became a crucial member in the Respect Life ministry. Taken together, they all began growing in fact and action – on the one hand, their experience prompted them to reflect more on their role in the Church, specifically as they pray at each meeting, “I pray that I am faithful to the Gospel, that I am doing my part to end the horrors of abortion and protect life.”<sup>2</sup>

Believing that they have found truth in the teachings of Christ and the Church, it is their goal to make their values the values of the entire parish community. This is out of firm conviction that if others knew the truths that they have found, stemming from their experiences, they would lead better and more joyful lives. Rejecting the culture of death for the Gospel and culture of life, these Respect Life members have found what they believe is joy in their lives. From their perspective, they have found the truths of Christ and want to spread the Gospel to the rest of their community. They continue to exercise their agency in their work at the Women's Center, in their individual and collective prayer, and in the ways they try to reform the discourse at their parish.

### **Forming Conscience**

The United States Council of Catholic Bishops asks Catholics to form their own moral consciences intentionally. This is done through and with “a desire to embrace goodness and truth,... study [of] Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church,...

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase of the prayer taken from my fieldnotes.

[and] prayerful reflection” (USCCB 2011: 7). In this document written by the Bishops, Catholics are asked to hold in tension Church teachings and Scripture, individual conscience, and experience and reflection through prayer. Holding these in tension, recognizing the goods of the Church and desiring to always avoid evil, Catholics are instructed to engage in the political sphere.

The greater tradition of Catholicism historically has placed a strong emphasis on the fostering of individual conscience, dating at least as far back as St. Augustine (Dillon 1999: 14). In this sense, forming conscience stretches farther than just political preferences and engagement with the public sphere. Rather, it should be a conversion of the whole heart towards God: “conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith” (USCCB 2011: 7). Discerning the voice of God, then, Catholics are able to engage the world knowing that if they have intently formed their conscience, they can know and pursue truth in their lives for God is working in them through their conscience.

Certainly, this is what both parishioners of St. Mary Magdalene and St. Pius Parishes did. Through intentional reflection and discernment, the parishioners wrestled with deep questions and longings in their hearts: *Can one be Catholic and live a homosexual lifestyle with a long-term partner? Can the Church ordain women? Is abortion wrong? How can we protect the vulnerable in society?* In these questions, pointing at their core to the teachings on sexuality and life, the individual experiences were shared with one another at the parish level. For St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the

collective experience of knowing gay and lesbian people, and grappling with the teachings on women priests prompted a response of *all are welcome*. At St. Pius Parish, the collective experience of seeing God's desire for a *culture of life* amidst a broken world and culture led to a deep longing for Christ and a conscious effort to reform the parish culture to better meet the vision of truth. Conscience, then, was individually formed, but collectively shared.

At the core of this study is the intersection of many concepts central to sociology. The Catholic Church, an institution or organization, is operating at the local, regional, and global level. Individuals are asked to form their conscience stemming from their experience, and engage with the structure of the institution as agents responding to the call to form their consciences. Taking action together, two different groups formed two different cultures. In many ways, the individuals did exactly what the Church asked them to do in their local communities: they formed as communities of worship and listened deeply to see where God was working in their lives. For one group, by accepting the values propagated by the institutional Church, they were met with welcome; in contrast, the group forming a culture based on values in opposition to the Church was met with sanction by the larger institution. I argue that this process of conscience and parish culture formation impacts these parish's interactions with the larger institution in three specific ways: (a) in the way each group constructs boundaries, (b) in the partnerships that emerge for each group, and (c) in the greater institutional response. It is to these three differences that I now turn to.

*Symbolic Boundary Construction*

What emerged from each ethnography was a different conceptualization of symbolic boundaries. “Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality” (Lamont & Molnar 2002:168). In the process of forming conscience and culture, the narrative of St. Mary Magdalene and discourse of St. Pius Parish revealed who was counted among us and who was labeled as them. St. Mary Magdalene parishioners constructed boundaries that set the local church over against the institutional church whereas St. Pius Parish drew their boundaries around the wider Catholic Church over against the rest of society. Additionally, Respect Life members drew a boundary around what they deemed the “culture of life” that they were trying to promote, and the unaware parishioners. For each parish, this had implications for the projects that the parish was able to do because wrapped up in the boundaries constructed were shared cultural understandings.

St. Mary Magdalene Parish constructed a parish culture emphasizing an all are welcome message. For parishioners, this stemmed from a perceived exclusion of gay, lesbian, and women from the church, imposed upon by the wrong theology of the Church. Here at St. Mary Magdalene, however, parishioners could take solace knowing that their vision of Catholicism was true and actualized. As a consequence, parishioners perceived as themselves, the local church, as “us,” and the greater Catholic Church became “them.” For example, parishioners, staff, and priests talked about “downtown” referring to the Archdiocese of Chicago. Dorian Spencer, a long time parishioner said

that when parishioners have not liked something that happened in the parish, they have called “downtown.” Similarly, staff member Edmund said that they have to deal with calls from “downtown” when the Archdiocese perceives that something is not in line with the Church. Finally, drawing from the example of the Annual Catholic Appeal from chapter two, I showed that Fr. Dennis recognized anger at the church and worked to spin the appeal in a positive light to maximize participation and giving. The larger Catholic Church is positioned as an oppositional “other” for the parishioners at St. Mary Magdalene Church, stemming largely from the hurt and anger they feel for the Church’s positions, and the reactions of the Archdiocese to previous programs and changes the parish has tried to implement.

For St. Pius Parish Respect Life Parish, the reliance on the Archdiocese and United States Council of Catholic Bishops has aligned their efforts and created an “us” that is *us, the Roman Catholic Church*. As described in chapter three, it was the Roman Catholic Church that provided truth to the Respect Life group, and the Church continues to provide that. In contrast, the larger society and world is conceptualized as “them.” The greater world has perpetuated a culture of death, as Bo articulated, and it is up to the Catholic Church to actualize the new culture of life that Pope John Paul II wrote about. Thus, the group continues to draw upon the resources provided from the greater Catholic Church, attending workshops, purchasing brochures, and reading books that promulgate the truth that Catholicism can grant.

Additionally drawn is a boundary for St. Pius Respect Life members between their authentic “culture of life” and the larger parish culture which is unaware of the Catholic teaching on human sexuality and the dignity of human life they discovered.



Acknowledging the difference, the group recognizes that some parishioners in the parish are resisting the message, or at the very least, are apathetic to it. However, the group continues to partner with the Archdiocese in their Respect Life projects. The group works in the parish to promote the culture of life, with the hope that this will build a strong community of faith living out the true vision of Catholicism. This way, it is their hope that in their parish there will be no distinction between those who know the truth and those who do not; rather, both they and the larger parish will embrace this “culture of life.”

### *Partnering with Others*

The construction of symbolic boundaries, as described above, influences *who* each parish forms greater ties with in the community. While St. Mary Magdalene Parish constructed boundaries defining themselves in opposition to the greater Catholic Church, St. Pius Parish drew the boundary including the Church and in opposition to the greater culture of death across society. For each parish, these boundaries resulted in different tie formation with other groups: while St. Mary Magdalene Parish cofounded an interfaith network of religious communities in their community (INRC) and joined a local community organizing organization (LCO<sup>3</sup>), St. Pius Parish began working with other parishes on an annual Lenten Mission project and the Respect Life group partnered with the Archdiocese and network of other Respect Life groups in parishes.

For St. Mary Magdalene Parish, there was a distrust of the institutional church – since they perceive the larger Catholic Church as suspicious of their lay preaching team, excommunicating their woman priest parishioner, and issuing statements condemning

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<sup>3</sup> LNRC and LCO are not the actual initials but like the other names in this study, they are pseudonyms.

homosexuality, they would not partner with the Archdiocese.<sup>4</sup> When the parish wanted to have the parish play about abortion (see chapter two), they partnered with a local Lutheran community and later after the play ended, they formed the INRC, unifying neighborhood Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Parishioners were proud of the annual INCR Thanksgiving meal which rotated to different houses of worship each year and brought together different communities. Additionally, the parish staff and priests were very active in the leadership of LCO, the community organizing organization that worked together on issues in their larger section of city of Chicago. This was consistent with both the *all are welcome* social justice motto and the symbolic boundaries – here, parishioners and staff worked to welcome all into their church, including those of other faiths without partnering with the larger institution who they perceived dismissed their vision of Catholicism.

St. Pius Parish worked with the larger Catholic Church because they perceived the Church as part of “us.” For one thing, the literature available at the Church came straight from the larger Church. Fr. David would emphasize when there were free copies of *The Catholic New World*, the official newspaper of the Archdiocese. In contrast, while they were available at St. Mary Magdalene, the pastor and parish staff never advertised this. Additionally, Bianca told me she ordered all the brochures on Respect Life from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops and relied on their resources to provide to parishioners. Especially for the Respect Life ministry, this partnership with the Archdiocese strengthened their own ministry. In an interview with the coordinator of the

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<sup>4</sup> Parishioners did speak of working with other parishes to construct the Regional Catholic High School but there was even frustrations by some parishes because the main campus was to be located at St. Mary Magdalene Parish. This merger was out of financial necessity and was the only collaboration I heard about or observed with other Catholic Churches specifically.

group, Vicki Buchannan, I learned that she attended larger meetings with other Respect Life coordinators from the Archdiocese and would get ideas for projects from them. In the course of the interview, she even pulled out the Respect Life binder given to her from the Archdiocesan Respect Life office to show me that she relied on the connection with the greater church.

While not the central focus of my study, I also observed that the parish as a whole partnered each year with other parishes to host a “Lenten Mission.” A mission is a type of prayer service over a course of days intended to inspire some renewal in the parish. Nora was on the original committee when the annual mission started a few years ago, and recounts that they “formed a committee and we had a great time. Our Lady of Lourdes Parish<sup>5</sup> asked if they could be part of our mission. We said sure, and it was a two parish mission, and then it started growing and it was really cool.” Now St. Pius hosts the mission along with four other parishes, and the event, similar to the INCR Thanksgiving event at St. Mary Magdalene Parish, rotates to different parishes each year. This example shows a continued effort of the parish to continually partner with other local parishes to grow in Catholic faith and reaffirm Catholic identity.

### *Institutional Response to Cultures*

On all issues related to human life and sexuality, the Catholic Church has a tradition of teachings that are deemed the right and proper versions of truth. These stem from the Catholic belief in the dignity of each human life, ranging from conception to death (USCCB 2011). At the core of all of these teachings is natural law theory philosophy, stemming as far back as Augustine who believed that “truth and every just

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<sup>5</sup> Consistent with all other names, this parish name is a pseudonym.

law are inscribed in the human heart” (Dillon 1999: 55). Teachings on sexuality unfold from the Church’s understandings of creation in the book of Genesis, and emphasize that the form of relationship ordained by God is the monogamous marriage between a man and woman. Finally, coming from a complex theology about the relationship between Jesus and the Church, related to life and sexuality, the Church argues that they only have the authority to ordain men to the priesthood (John Paul II 1994).

The Church, just like the parishioners in this study, is equally concerned with what ultimate truth is, and has constructed their theology believing that truth has been both found through faith in God and human reason. Thus, from their vantage point, one can assume that they would like to protect and ensure that truth persists in a world with competing value systems.

As such, the Church responded differently to each parish.<sup>6</sup> For parishioners at St. Mary Magdalene Parish, they reported that the Church responded with sanction and force on multiple occasions. When the parish wanted to have ex-priests say mass, Cardinal Bernadin told Fr. Kavanaugh that was not to happen. Fr. Kavanaugh responded by creating the lay preaching team, but it was dismantled by the Archdiocese once Fr. Dennis began at the parish. Similarly, when the parish wanted to have the funeral for woman priest Sabrina Nottingham, the Archdiocese responded with sanction and suggested that Fr. Dennis might be removed if the funeral proceeded. Parishioners repeatedly reported a fear of a reaction from “downtown,” recognizing that a move sending in a conservative priest or enforcement of strict orthodoxy from the Archdiocese

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<sup>6</sup> I did not interview or work with anyone from the Archdiocese of Chicago; rather, I am relying on the fieldwork and interviews to make this case.

would derail their own cultural narrative towards one that runs opposite to the one they have constructed.

St. Pius Parish partnered with the Archdiocese, and the Archdiocese responded by supplying resources to the parish to assist. For example, the parish was a recipient of Annual Catholic Appeal assistance to retire an outstanding parish debt. While unrelated to the Respect Life ministry, during my fieldwork, the parish was in the process of reformulating their own relationship between the Archdiocese and their school, and ultimately turned financial administration of the school over to the Archdiocese. This was because of declining enrollment in the school and increased financial dependency on the part of St. Pius to keep the parish school financially stable. In both of these cases, the Archdiocese was seen as a partner responding with support. Finally, in the course of my fieldwork, Cardinal George came to say mass at the parish, and parishioners responded with excitement for the weeks before and after the event. In an interview with active parishioner Laura Smith, she said that hosting Cardinal George was one of the moments she felt most proud to be a parishioner.

Though I did not interview or work with anyone at the Archdiocese of Chicago to understand the different relationships between the Archdiocese and the local parish, I argue it is fair to assert that the parishes were treated differently by Archdiocesan officials. Perhaps St. Pius built a harmonious relationship whereas St. Mary Magdalene viewed the Church with distrust. However, from their perspective, St. Mary Magdalene Parishioners had experienced direct sanction by the Archdiocese. This relates back to the larger question of the relationships between the institutional church, the local parish culture, and the individual agency and experience of the parishioners. One can

hypothesize that when the intended culture is deemed within orthodoxy by the institutional church, the Archdiocese responds with support, especially if the pursuit of orthodoxy results in greater orthodoxy. For St. Pius Respect Life members, it is their goal to move their church to a more orthodox version of Catholicism. Consequently, the Church is in an interesting position. It encourages the formation of individual conscience. As a result though, some are deemed orthodox and are positively sanctioned with open arms; others are labeled contrary, and negative sanctions is the response of the institution. One might wonder what the Church thinks will happen when people link their experience, their prayer, the teachings of the Church, and their parish culture together in an intentional reflection of conscience. Is it reasonable to assume that a cookie cutter conscience will emerge? If that is the case, it is evident here that this was not the result.

### **Conclusion**

This study emerged in an attempt to understand how parish cultures emerged around politics. As described in this and previous chapters, I studied a parish that had a strong social justice culture and a second parish with a strong respect life group. For the social justice parish, St. Mary Magdalene Parish, I listened as parishioners relayed to me the collective narrative that had been constructed in their parish. When I attended the Respect Life group and other events at St. Pius Parish, I witnessed a small group actively seeking to reform the discourse of their parish so that a “culture of life” would exist in the parish.

These parish differences emerged for a couple of reasons. Certainly, the role of the priest was important for both parishes: at St. Mary Magdalene Parish, the coming of Fr. Kavanaugh and the continuity with Fr. Dennis allowed for an *all are welcome*

narrative and culture to be fostered and maintained. At St. Pius Parish, it was Fr. David who ultimately allowed the Respect Life group to take deeper roots in the parish and begin cultivating the fruit of its roots. The story must include the priests, but it does not stop just with their influence.

To say that it was just the priests minimizes the deep negotiations of conscience that the Catholics in this study truly wrestled with. Responding to the Church's call that they form their own conscience, an important teaching historically in Catholicism, these Catholics grappled with difficult questions that are at the core of who we are as people. Deeper than just deciding what projects were important to one another, these parishioners asked questions that hit at our existence as humans. Central to their conscience formation were questions about life, human sexuality, and what God's plan for human life truly is. In a deep and intentional pursuit of truth, individuals formed their moral consciences and came together as a community of believers to understand these consciences. Prayer reflection, both individually and collectively, led to the formation of cultural values that are manifestations of these Catholics' understandings of truth. Culture is understood throughout this thesis as shared values and is an activation of the discoveries of what truth truly is. For St. Mary Magdalene Parish, this took the form in an *all are welcome* narrative. For St. Pius Parish Respect Life, it meant an active reformulation of the *moral discourse*, perhaps someday also resulting in a shared collective narrative.

What is most significant here is that both groups of Catholics took seriously the call from the Church to form their consciences, but in doing so, formed two competing visions of truth. These visions affected the projects the parishes adopted, the boundaries they formed in society and the partnerships with others. These differing visions were

viewed differently by the institutional Church. For St. Mary Magdalene Parish, this resulted in sanctions and hurt feelings, because their formation of conscience and culture led to an oppositional truth. For St. Pius Parish, an acceptance of the institutional church was well received. What comes next in the cultural narratives and discourses of each parish and their relationship with the greater Church? This, like the rest of the story presented, will continue to unfold as these Catholics continue to heed the call from the Church – negotiating their consciences and coming together to be a community of faith. As this thesis has shown, situated in the greater literature around Catholic identity, American Catholics continue in the pursuit of truth, forming consciences and cultures. Coming together in community, these cultures continue to interact with the institutional structure of Catholicism, resulting in an ever continuing dialogue on what qualifies as truth and what it means to be a Catholic today.



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## VITA

Lucas Sanjeeb Sharma was born in Kathmandu, Nepal, and grew up in Olympia, Washington. His academic interests include religion, American Catholicism, politics, culture, housing policy, and Jesuit education. He attended Gonzaga University where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Economics, Summa Cum Laude and with honors in the Department of Sociology in 2009. At Gonzaga, he conducted survey research with Dr. Matthew Bahr on Catholic identity and political preferences among college millennial Catholics. Following graduation from Gonzaga, Lucas completed a year of service with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Washington, D.C., where he worked in legal services at Bread for the City.

While at Loyola University Chicago, Lucas served on the Graduate Association of Sociologists and received the 2012 Outstanding Graduate Student Award for Service from the Department of Sociology. In addition to service to the department, he became active Loyola's Campus Ministry, leading a graduate student retreat and an alternate spring break trip. He also served as the advisor to the Sociology Club, and has presented research at Loyola and at regional and national conferences.

Upon graduation, Lucas will enter the Society of Jesus of the Oregon Province and will begin the novitiate in Culver City, California.

