

A Pre-Constantinian Church for a Post-Christian Age:

A Description of St Paul's Parish, Riverside, Illinois



The paradigm for St Paul's Parish is a pre-Constantinian congregation, the Church before the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in A.D. 313. That new status, imposed by the Emperor Constantine the Great in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to stem the terminal decline of the western empire, overnight profoundly changed the Church from a very small but highly intentional, ministerial community to a politically correct element of his newly-established Christian society. While this rapid radical change provided the Church with unprecedented material wealth and prominence as well as enormous numbers of at least *pro forma* members, it came at a very high cost to the Church's theologically-centered life and mission.

The final collapse of "Christendom" in the second half of the Twentieth Century and dramatic decline of church institutions of every Christian tradition in the West at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century have resulted in institutional conditions strikingly similar to those characteristic of the pre-Constantinian Church in the Second and Third Centuries. St Paul's community believes that the most – and perhaps ultimately the only – effective response to this life-threatening situation is a "return to roots:" recovering the values, lifestyle, and culture that characterized the pre-Constantinian Church.

Like the pre-Constantinian Church, St Paul's parish life is centered in Christian mission, not in maintaining programs and/or monumental buildings.

- The Episcopal Church has officially defined its mission on all levels as having five components:
 - corporate [communal] sacramental liturgy
 - Christian education and formation
 - pastoral care, both crisis and corporate [communal]
 - social ministry (ministry out in society: "pastoral care beyond the Church")
 - evangelization (bringing all people to accept, worship, and obey Jesus Christ as Lord within the fellowship of the Catholic Church)

- These five components of mission are the center and priority of St Paul's parish life and allocation of the resources of time, talent, and treasure. Buildings serve and programs exist for solely this five-fold Christian mission.

- Endowments have been established by benefactors to provide a basic "safety net" for ensuring in perpetuity outward looking mission-centered ministry regardless of inevitable economic cycles but have been structured so as never to support an inward looking religious club.

Like the pre-Constantinian Church, **every core - i.e. canonical - member of St Paul's Parish, within his/her physical capabilities, is an active life-long minister.**

- For this reason canonical membership in St Paul's Parish requires both a substantial process of education and formation and the ongoing commitment to living out the three levels of the parish Rule of Life.

"Extended family" members who may be at any place in their own spiritual journey, however, are a valued part of St Paul's Parish and are always free to participate in the way they choose, as long as their behavior does not interfere with the rights of others.
- Activities that are not directly related to the parish's immediate ministerial mission are kept to a minimum; and, if they threaten to "burn out" parish ministers, they are delegated to support staff if possible or are terminated.

Like the pre-Constantinian Church, **St Paul's Parish is counter-cultural.**

- The parish Core Values are:
 - Valid Eucharist
 - Catholic Spirituality
 - Continual Individual Growth
 - Transcendent Liturgy
 - Accepting Family
- These Core Values are the "DNA" of the parish; and it is they, not the popular culture, that determine the life and culture of the parish. At St Paul's their integrity is always protected regardless of the current dictates of the secular culture.
- All pre-Constantinian congregations were small but very stable, highly focused theologically, and deeply committed to their mission of being the Body of Christ. In the same way, St Paul's is not principally concerned with the number of parishioners but with the authenticity, integrity, and faithfulness of the ministry of the community regardless of its current size, with a high value placed on members' stability (ongoing life in the community).

Like the pre-Constantinian Church, **St Paul's Parish is Catholic, not congregational or provincial.**

- St Paul's Parish is committed to being always in Full Communion with the See of Canterbury and actively works to promote Full Communion with the whole Catholic Church (Anglican, Roman, Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholic, and Oriental) world-wide.
- St Paul's Parish is Catholic in both its faith and practice, holding and teaching nothing that is contrary to the faith and practice of the historic Universal Church.