



## ST PAUL'S PARISH

Riverside, Illinois

*We believe, practice and teach the full Catholic Faith  
and support and promote authentic Catholic culture.*

### Rector's Renewal Reflections 22 June 2013

*This reflection was prompted by two things: (1) a class discussion on Tuesday evening and (2) my reading last night a website "Parish Profile" from [name on request] Episcopal Church's new-Rector search process that dismayed me ... in spite of a lot of current craziness in the Episcopal Church, I really did think that whatever else, we were now past country club parishes for social climbers and wannabees.*

Without doubt the most significant change in St Paul's Parish during the second half of the 20th Century was the systemic move from being a (and Riverside's premier) militant center of WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture to being a thorough-going center of Benedictine (and thus Anglican, rather than secular Roman) Catholic culture.

As I have thought about it, over the past 35 years almost everyone who has left St Paul's for "non-demographic" reasons (i.e. not because of business transfer, retirement, etc.) has left because he/she wanted to be a part of a congregation with WASP culture of which over the years there was unmistakably less and less here. And as Fr Robert Gallagher has continually pointed out, the question is culture not other, relatively superficial, characteristics that are most often given as reasons. (There have been however, I believe, a couple of exceptions where persons have not been pro-WASP as much as just not comfortable for one reason or another with a distinctly Benedictine form of Catholic culture. On the other hand, those who do leave for demographic reasons almost inevitably become disappointed, frustrated, and even occasionally angry when they cannot find another parish like St Paul's!)

As we all know, St Paul's defies stereotyping. While it is not "with the national Episcopal Church program," it is not reactionary "religious right" either (which is after all the quintessential American expression of Calvinistic WASP culture). While it is unmistakably and uncompromisingly Catholic, it is not Anglo-Catholic or secular American Roman Catholic. While it has very demanding, monastic-type criteria for achieving and maintaining canonical membership, it is one of the rare places where everyone truly is free to be her/himself and participate in any way that is comfortable for him/her, the only condition being that his/her behavior is not impolite (i.e. does not violate basic Christian courtesy and respect for others) and does not interfere with the rights of others. And here that is actually authentic, not a PC slogan.

Because – as the old Marshall Field's ads in "The New Yorker" used to say, *When you are in Chicago, visit Marshall Field's. There is nothing like it back home.* – people have nothing to compare us with, it has been

extraordinarily difficult through the decades to articulate – particularly in sound-bites – who and what we are. Through the years we have used descriptors such as “Catholic theology,” “historic Anglicanism,” “authentic Anglican family,” and “Benedictine,” but we have never talked about culture *per se*.

The fact is that we are completely counter-cultural; that is, our corporate life and values are completely counter to secular Calvinist-based WASP culture – in both its classical American form (“the greatest generation”) and the neo Gen X/Millennials’ form – which overwhelmingly dominates Western materialistic, “entitled,” individualistic values and expectations (read “my non-negotiable demands”). This is, of course, the basic matter that separates us from predominant current Episcopal Church values: the “emerging church” is (really quite pathetically and embarrassingly) desperately running after the popular, secular, and essentially anti-Christian culture and apologetically begging to be accepted by it at any price ... behavior that in the end *nobody* respects, much less finds attractive and engaging for oneself.

The question I have is, do we need to consider re-phrasing our “brand identification” from descriptors that are historical and theological (and hence less and less understood generally, and perhaps even worse, more and more misunderstood) to cultural descriptors.

As I have said so often, I firmly believe that all the indications are that while the vast and overwhelming majority of Gen Xers and Millennials do not have – and will not have for the foreseeable future – any interest whatsoever in the institutional church (“organized religion”), that small percentage of them which does (perhaps in reaction against their Baby Boomer parents) wants “the historic real thing.” (“If I want contemporary secular culture I don’t have to come to a church to get it; it’s much more authentic in the secular world.”)

Anecdotally speaking, all of our new young adults say they are looking for “authentic” [orthodox?] Christian life and practice and want the Church to be countercultural. All of our newcomers are, in addition, looking for Catholic culture and values, not just “high church” liturgy. However, I am not sure that *Benedictine* Catholic culture as such holds any interest for them. (There has been no interest in decades among “seekers” at St Paul’s in a “bridge church” with Catholic and Protestant cultural features, a public image the national Episcopal Church in the past has worked to present – generally to appeal to young couples in a Roman Catholic-Protestant “mixed marriage” seeking a workable religious compromise ... something that has latterly morphed into “diversity and inclusivity.”)

Should our sound-bite “brand identification” include, or even principally focus on, “Catholic culture” as an alternative to shallow, PC, popular secular culture?