

St. Anthony of Padua R.C. Church

160 Court Street, Buffalo, New York

TRADITIONALLY SPEAKING by S. Casarotto, CS 12/7/08

WHERE DO YOU “BELONG“?

One of my first shocks in arriving to this country many moons ago was the *parochialism* among Catholics. It was almost a sin to attend mass in another Catholic church or cross parish boundaries. In the 30's, Italians on the West Side, for example, were even prevented by *arbitrary* boundaries from being buried from St. Anthony's, the church they had helped build. The issue eventually was settled by the Vatican. So, let us remember some basic things.

An old principle of Church law is that “*Non sunt vagi in ecclesia*”, there are no wanderers in the Church. This means that every Catholic has a church to call home. Even when a church closes, parishioners never close and they are assigned with their assets to a nearby parish. It is true that, through Baptism, we become members of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, no matter where we live. The Pope, Vicar of Christ, is head of the Church. The Bishops are the successors of the Apostles and shepherds of the Particular Church, the bond of unity with the universal Church.

According to Church Law (*Can. 515f*), geographic boundaries determine the ordinary administrative cell called “parish” in which the ministry of the Church is being carried out. The domicile (residence) or quasi-domicile, and not one's choice or the approval of a Pastor, determine to which parish a Catholic “belongs.” According to Church law, there is no “free affiliation” (*I like Fr. Joe. etc.*) nor the canonical requirement to “register” (=use of Sunday envelopes!). Whether a Catholic attends that parish or not, as long as he/she lives within its boundaries, he is always a parishioner. There may be “stray sheep” but they are always members of the particular fold of Chris assigned by the Bishop to a particular pastor. It is in the local parish that a Catholic normally should and, if well disposed, has the right to receive the Sacraments, receive the needed care and grow in faith and service with his brothers and sisters. If there are reasons for flexibility about where to attend mass, there is more to Catholic life that attending mass. Catholics who say they go here and there and everywhere usually don't go anywhere.

However, in order to provide to special and unmet needs of the faithful, Church law mandates, at the discretion of the Bishop, other provisions, such as language or ethnic parishes, chaplaincies, etc. These *personal parishes* do not have a territory. Their territory is the *condition of need* of the people they are called to serve and the pastor of a “personal parish” has *cumulative* or additional/parallel responsibility with the pastors of the territorial parishes. The faithful may attend these personal parishes, regularly or occasionally, at their discretion and spiritual benefit. In addition, these special provisions were established not for the Church to be ethnic, but for ethnics to be Church. Timely and proper use of these extraordinary and canonical means of pastoral care have proven to be the best and necessary way for the preservation, witnessing and sharing of the Catholic faith. They have also been the means to a *faster integration* - not assimilation - of newcomers and their community into the host society.

Obviously, every Catholic has the obligation to keep the laws of the Church concerning attending Mass every Sunday and days of obligation, celebration of marriage, and, also in justice, contribute financially and otherwise to the ministry of the parish (local and/or personal), including Catholic education and special services.

Worth noting also is the fact that a Catholic, unless denied by church law (*Can. 1184*), may be buried from any Catholic church, even if he or she was not attending that parish. The Church who welcomed us as a Mother in Baptism is our Mother until the end.