

Closed Parishes in New England
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Parish Diary
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I just came back from a week in New England. It was gorgeous. Nothing is more beautiful than New England in the spring, unless it is New England in the fall.

But it was depressing at the same time.

Everywhere we went we saw Catholic churches and schools closed and for sale. It looked like a “going out of business” sale.

Massachusetts, where I was visiting, used to be among the most Catholic places in the USA. But today church attendance appears to be cratering and parishes are closing by the score.

A quick check of the web sites of dioceses in the Bay State shows dozens of closed and merged churches. The list of parishes closed or merged in the Archdiocese of Boston alone runs for nine pages in tiny type.

I spoke with one pastor in the Springfield, MA, area who told me that his merged and consolidated parish had about 4,000 families. He was the only priest until very recently. Some weeks he had a funeral every day. He was exhausted. No wonder.

In another town in the Berkshires, six parishes out of 11 parishes had been closed. It was sad to see beautiful churches and schools with a “for sale” signs. It sends a message to the community. I thought of all the faithful who had built those places and made them go.

The web site of the Diocese of Worcester has press releases detailing what happened to the property. Many of the buildings are still being used for worship by Protestant churches. But I noted that several are now Spanish speaking evangelical churches.

Many of the closed parishes were ethnic parishes. They were built to serve communities that no longer lived in the area or no longer had a strong ethnic cohesion.

Often there was more than one Catholic Church and school in the same neighborhood or even on the same block.

I do not fault the Bishops for selling off properties. It had to be done.

Bishops have to deal with the reality of changing demographics. The Church does not exist to maintain buildings or perpetuate institutions. We exist to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, it leaves one with an overwhelming sense of sadness and death.

Are we going out of business? Why aren't the people coming to church?

Those towns were still crowded with people. The streets and the shops appeared to be full and busy. There has not been a dramatic drop in population from some modern black plague.

It is just that people have stopped going to church. Have we asked why?

Much of this is the blow back from the clergy child abuse scandal that hit New England particularly hard. We had to know this would happen.

Some of it results from a shortage of clergy. We just don't have the priests to staff all the parishes anymore and there are not enough in the pipeline. With fewer and bigger parishes, priests are more overworked and overwhelmed. The cycle of decline perpetuates itself.

The closures are not confined to New England. They are all across the northeast, Midwest and Middle Atlantic regions.

But, I wonder, why aren't alarm bells going off?

Oddly there are some people in the conservative camp, who take satisfaction in these closures. At times we hear them say that they want a smaller and purer church. The departure of what they derisively call “cafeteria” Catholics means that only pure and committed Catholics will remain.

They might be right.

But be careful what you pray for. You might get it.