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Serving the Catholic Community of the Diocese of La Crosse

## What makes a parish a parish? An interview with two men 'in the know'

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LA CROSSE – What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your parish? Is it the church's belltower? Is it Sunday Mass? Or do you recall your volunteer work at last week's fundraiser?

We all belong to a parish, and we all participate in its life to a greater or lesser degree. But what is it exactly that makes our parish a parish? And furthermore, what is it that makes us parishioners?

These are questions Benedict Nguyen and Father Francis Abuah-Quansah tackled recently in separate interviews with *The Catholic Times*. They said Catholics here naturally have these types of questions on their minds as the Diocese of La Crosse considers altering its parochial landscape. In the works is a pastoral plan that could dramatically reduce the sum total of parishes while keeping all the diocese's church buildings open.

Both Nguyen and Father Abuah-Quansah hold advanced degrees in Canon (Church) Law – Nguyen a licentiate from the Catholic University of America in Washington, and Father Abuah-Quansah a doctorate from the Pontifical Urban University in Rome. A layman, Nguyen serves as



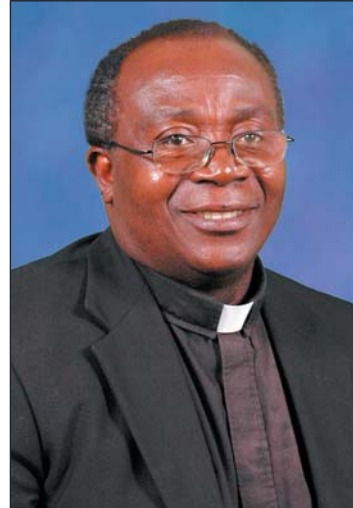
**Benedict Nguyen**

chancellor of the Diocese of La Crosse, while Ghanan Father Abuah-Quansah is pastor of two rural parishes: St. Joseph's, St. Joseph's Ridge, and St. Peter's, Middle Ridge.

### **A community of the faithful**

Both Nguyen and Father Abuah-Quansah began defining what a parish is by citing Canon 515: "A parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular Church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the diocesan bishop."

"Definitions can be dangerous," Father Abuah-Quansah said, "but this is a fine descrip-



**Father Francis  
Abuah-Quansah**

tion which I find quite succinct. It's a community – that's where the emphasis is in the New (1983) Code." Nguyen concurred. "The Code of Canon Law, especially the 1983 Code, defines canonical realities in the light of the people," he said.

### **Belonging to a parish**

Practically speaking, Nguyen said, every baptized Catholic belongs to a parish, whether he or she has signed up or not, since parishes traditionally have territorial boundaries, and claim as members all the Catholics living within those boundaries.

But Nguyen added that the New Code gives bishops more

leeway to establish parishes for other reasons, such as making available the older form of the Mass, and more leeway to the laity to sign up at parishes other than the one to which they belong territorially.

Wherever they choose to be members, Father Abuah-Quansah said, there's more to being a member than signing up on the parish's roster, or even attending Mass on Sundays.

"The Church is the Body of Christ," he explained. "The Body of Christ does not just float about. I mean, precisely by the fact of the Incarnation, we need to incarnate the mystery of Christ at every point. I think this is what is actually the basis of what a parish is."

"A particular community of people makes Christ visible in their activity," he continued, "in the way they pray, in the way they come to an understanding of the Word of God, in the way they want to support the growth of the whole community. The parish becomes their whole identity, and it gives them a sense of who they are as Christians. We cannot just be spiritual; we must be incarnated, made concrete."

### **Providing pastoral care**

Nguyen agreed that the Church as an institution is in

need of the parish. The parish's very structure is essential, he said, as an entity that helps the bishop – a successor of the apostles – to minister to the faithful entrusted to him.

“Bishop (Jerome) ListECKI is the apostle in our midst,” Nguyen said. “He is the one responsible for our pastoral care, and the priests of the diocese are his representatives. But he's one man, and there are 200,000 Catholics in our diocese. That's why he has to use the priests who are united to him.”

“Administratively, the division is into parishes, but their configuration can change,” Nguyen added. “That's what pastoral planning is. We're trying to figure out how we as a diocese, and how the bishop as the apostle in our midst, are going to provide the pastoral care for everybody. With the shortage of priests, the bishop needs to take a look and say, ‘I can't do it with this model

anymore.’”

“The challenge is to look beyond our parochial lines and our church buildings,” Nguyen continued, “to look beyond and ask, ‘Who's our pastor here?’ We belong to a bigger flock. We just happen to be subdivided as we currently are. The real thread that joins us all together is the person of the bishop.”

#### **Danger of ‘parochialism’**

As the pastor of two parishes that might merge their resources in the coming years, Father Abuah-Quansah knows change won't come easily. “St. Peter's and St. Joseph's are parishes that were established along lines of immigration,” he explained. “So even if they don't talk about it too much, you can see in the life of the community that there has been a long history of bondedness.”

Father Abuah-Quansah emphasized that this can be a very good thing. “I think that be-

cause of it, nothing is beyond them that they want to accomplish,” he said. “There is really a sense that this is us – this is how we have lived, this is the community of our forebears, we have our cemetery. It's all one piece.”

“But the danger is that they tend to be a little bit suspicious of newcomers in the community,” he added. “Newcomers very often get a sense of ‘We do not belong the way they do.’”

#### **Part of something bigger**

Nguyen said that effective change begins with realizing that we're part of something bigger. “You should feel connected to your parish,” he said. “However, it's almost as if we've done this too well in the last century or so, where not only is it your parish, but it becomes your Catholic Church, and outside of it those ‘other people’ are almost of another religion.”

“That's overkill,” he continued. “The balance needs to be restored. And this is the mentality, I think, that pastoral planning challenges.”

Although they remain separate in terms of governance and finances, Father Abuah-Quansah said his two parishes have been sharing resources for quite some time out of necessity. Most significantly, each parish's bulletin contains Mass times for the other parish, and members of each parish are encouraged to attend events at the other.

Some parishes in the diocese that share priests have gone even further, combining CCD programs and launching other joint ventures.

According to Nguyen, pastoral planning is hoping to encourage precisely this type of openness and collaboration as the diocese attempts to meet the challenges of the future head-on.