

## SUPPRESSED CROATIAN–SLOVENIAN CATHOLIC PARISH IN SAN FRANCISCO AND PARISHIONERS' EFFORTS FOR ITS REOPENING

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National parishes, which flourished among immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century USA, were a compromise of Catholic leaders' interest in keeping their followers and lay people's desire to preserve their cultural heritage. However, over time the organizational strategy of the Church has changed: the church hierarchy incited adherents to join territorial parishes, and seldom approved the creation of new national parishes. This trend was only increased by the Second Vatican Council. In the 1980s, the US Catholic Church changed their viewpoint on parishes based on ethnic principle again with the introduction of the most recent Code of Canon Law (1983). A growing number of personal parishes today are an organizational alternative: an institutional response to religious diversification and meeting different ethnic and non-ethnic purposes.<sup>1</sup> However, several personal parishes providing service to communities of European ancestry have been forced to close or to merge.<sup>2</sup> An occurrence all over the USA is affecting territorial and personal parishes (except for Latino and Asian parishes) alike, usually because of lack of clergy, declining Mass attendance, as well as financial reasons.<sup>3</sup> Also, several Slovenian parishes closed or merged, for example in Leadville, CO, Denver, CO, Sheboygan,

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<sup>1</sup> Tricia C. Bruce, *Parish, and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 5–7.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John C. Seitz, *No Closure: Catholic Practice and Boston's Parish Shutdowns* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> While in San Francisco county, from 1980 to 2000 number of (self-declared) Catholics increased, many left the Catholic Church after the year 2000. The 1980–2010 change is -16.1%, in the 2000–2010 period -33.1%. In the 1980–2010 period in San Francisco County also 10 congregations closed down. In contrast, the number of Catholics in Marin County and San Mateo County, which are also part of the San Francisco archdiocese, increased, because of the influx of Catholic Latino population and the migrations from the City of San Francisco to other parts of the Bay Area in general (the Association of Religion Data Archive: <http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/rcms2010a.asp?U=06075&T=county&S=Name&Y=2010>)

WI, Pueblo, CO, and in Barberton, OH, where, for example, in 2002, Slovenian parish merged with Polish, Slovak and Hungarian parish. These mergers mostly also brought thorough restructuring and those new parishes do not resemble ethnic parishes anymore.

This issue is the focus of the paper, presenting parishioners' resistance to the closure of the Croatian-Slovenian Church (also referred to as the Slavic parish) of the Nativity of Our Lord in 1994 and its subsequent reopening two years later as Polish–Croatian–Slovenian parish.

To contextualize, the church in question was established in 1903 and is one of more than 55 parishes that were established in the USA by Slovenians alone or together with other nations, usually Croatians, Slovaks, Italians, Germans, Poles, and Hungarians. The overwhelming majority of these national parishes are/were Catholic, one, in Bethlehem, PA, is Lutheran.<sup>4</sup> Besides serving the religious needs of migrants and their families, the parish has been historically also an important cultural hub for the Slovenian community. Early Slovenian settlers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that formed a clustered settlement at Potrero Hill in San Francisco were typically economic immigrants that worked in mines, factories, port, and as artisans, the profile that has not changed at least until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the displaced persons, collaborators with occupying forces, anti-communists, and other emigrants from Yugoslavia usually referred to as “political emigration” moving (also) to the US in the years following World War II, gave a new impetus particularly to the religious life, while their political beliefs triggered some internal conflicts as well.<sup>5</sup> Changing migration policy in the 1960s, including the introduction of new citizenship law (1964), Yugoslavia was the only socialist country that allowed its citizens to freely migrate. Since then, the prime motive to

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<sup>4</sup> Matjaž Klemenčič, “Slovenes beyond Slovenia, in Europe and Overseas,” in Matjaž Klemenčič and Mary N. Harris, eds., *European migrants, diasporas and indigenous ethnic minorities* (Pisa: Plus-Pisa University Press, 2009) p. 67; Darko Friš, *Ameriški Slovenci in katoliška Cerkev 1871–1924* [American Slovenes and the Catholic Church 1871–1924] (Klagenfurt, Ljubljana, Vienna: Mohorjeva družba, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Matjaž Klemenčič, “K zgodovini slovenskih naselbin v Kaliforniji [To the history of Slovene settlements in California],” *Zgodovinski časopis*, vol. 54, no. 4 (1999), pp. 483–529.

move to the USA has been economic.<sup>6</sup> While not many Slovenians have decided to migrate to the USA in recent years, those who do, are usually highly skilled professionals (“brain drain”). These are, similarly as the younger generation of well-integrated children of migrants, less inclined to get actively involved in “traditional” community organizations, such as Slovenian home (the cultural center) or the ethnic parish. Therefore, without a recent mass migration wave, Slovenian immigrants (“the first generation”) in San Francisco Bay Area largely consist of older persons, who are about the same age group as descendants of once numerous migrants that moved to the area mostly before World War I. Other significant characteristics are dispersed settlement – most Slovene Americans left the ethnic settlement in San Francisco soon after World War II – and high level of integration, e.g. adaptability and a high share of “mixed” marriages. Still, the ethnic parish has remained an important place of meeting for the Slovenian diaspora,<sup>7</sup> which is well represented by the response of Slovenian and Croatian communities to the threat of its closing.

The San Francisco Archdiocese included the Slavic parish in their Pastoral Plan dated 14 November 1993, which relegated 11 parishes from sacred to profane use (but not sordid use) and announced their final closure on 30 June 1994. Before the announcement also St. Paul’s parish was planned for closure, however, selling their high school and elementary school covered the costs for retrofitting the church, which was the official reason to remain open. According to some documents, also Italian ethnic parish of Immaculate conception was considered to be closed but was soon removed from the list,<sup>8</sup> leaving Nativity of Our Lord parish as the only personal/ethnic parish to be suppressed. By June 1994 the list was reduced to

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<sup>6</sup> See Ulf Brunnbauer, *Globalizing Southeastern Europe: Emigrants, America, and the State Since the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 260, 284–287.

<sup>7</sup> Bogan Kolar, *Slovenian Priests and Priests of Slovenian Descent in the Catholic Communities of California* (San Francisco: Educational and Dramatic Club Slovenia; Ljubljana: Salve, 2004); Peter Lah et al. (eds.), *The Church of the Nativity of Our Lord: A Centennial* (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, Closed parishes, 1992-1998, Box 1, f. 8. Letter from attorney Thomas J. Brandi to Rev. Zenon Grochowski, Secretary of Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura; San Francisco, August 5, 1994, Re: Closure of the Church of the Nativity San Francisco, California.

9 parishes, as St. Michael's Church became a national Korean parish, while St. Benedict merged with St. Francisco Xavier Church.<sup>9</sup>

The main factor for the Council of Priests of the San Francisco Archdiocese to propose the closing of the Croatian-Slovenian parish in San Francisco was its viability. Concerns over that issue were backed up by their pastor of Croatian descent John Mihovilovich, who retired soon after the church was temporarily closed, but on the other hand refuted by the parishioners represented by the Croatian-Slovenian United Committee (later renamed to Croatian and Slovenian United Foundation). The number of regular church attendees had certainly decreased, and consequently also the number of sacramental celebrations, several parishioners were elderly, while maybe the most pressing issue was to find a new pastor. However, irrespective of parishioners' age, they were still active in Men's club, Women's sodality, choir, youth choir, they offered aid to refugees from the former Yugoslavia,<sup>10</sup> including adopting 6 children from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unlike some other parishes, Nativity of Our Lord had no financial problems, managed to pay the annual revenue to the archdiocese in time, and did not need costly seismic retrofitting. These were all the reasons behind the reorganization of the archdiocese, stated by the Church officials, including the decreasing number of church attendance in the area. Convinced that such measures would only push away even more Catholic believers, most of the parishes disagreed with this kind of approach, organizing demonstrations and filing lawsuits and recourses. In these endeavors, three parishes stand out: St. Brigid, Tom More, and the Nativity of Our Lord, which used all legal ways to prove their case. As it turned out, even before the final decision which parish to close, the archdiocese ordered a secret report determining the price of the churches' properties. The press and several informants I

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<sup>9</sup> *The Independent*, August 1, 1995, Closed churches could bring in \$43 million.

<sup>10</sup> Ivo Ravnik's private archive, Letter from Ivo Ravnik, president of the Croatian and Slovenian United Foundation, to John Quinn, archbishop of San Francisco, November 23, 1993.

interviewed agree that the main reason for the closures of several parishes was also in this archdiocese the costly lawsuits and out-of-court settlements related to sexual scandals.<sup>11</sup>

Slovenian and Croatian parishioners responded vigorously to Archbishop John Quinn's decision, determined to prove their rights to continue the worship in the church they and their predecessors bought, maintained, and financed for nearly a century. Peaceful demonstrations were organized by people praying the rosary in front of the closed church, and the lawsuits were filed at the San Francisco Superior Court, at The Congregation for the Clergy and the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura in the Vatican. Legal endeavors, which demanded major input by laypeople uninformed of legal procedures specific of the Catholic Church, did not bring much success. As their attorney-procurator, Dr. Martha Wegan summarized in the comment of the Vatican Supreme Court's ruling: "It is not the case which was refused, but the lack of presuppositions (legal standing, etc.). It must be difficult to win."<sup>12</sup> However, the change of leadership at the archdiocese brought new hope, as the new archbishop William Levada was prepared to reconsider the matter. Cardinal-to-be Levada in negotiations that followed with representatives of the parishioners, as well as with Slovenian bishop Metod Piriš, agreed to reopen the church on a condition to include vibrant local Polish Catholic community, which did not have a church of their own.<sup>13</sup> Symbolically, the first religious service in the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord after more than two years was held on the Christmas day of 1996. Since then Polish mission "The Society of Christ Fathers for Poles Living Abroad" has been nominating the pastors. With the compromise solution, new challenges have arisen to build

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<sup>11</sup> *The Independent*, August 1, 1995, Closed churches could bring in \$43 million.

<sup>12</sup> Ivo Ravnik's private archive, Prot. N. 25427/94 C.A. Sancti Francisci in California, Suppressionis paroeciae Nativitatis et reductionis ecclesiae paroecialis ad usum profanum; City of Vatican, February 29, 1996. Cf. The parishioners of the Slovenian Catholic Church in Bethlehem, PA, also filed for recourse at the Supreme Court in the Vatican and were partly successful: the church has remained open, but without regular religious services (see <https://radio.ognjisce.si/sl/124/slovenija/5863/>).

<sup>13</sup> *Družina*, November 24, 1996; Ivo Ravnik's private archive, The Letter from Metod Piriš, bishop of Koper, Slovenia, to Ivo Ravnik; Koper, 1996.

good relationships within this multicultural personal parish, which has preserved the characteristics of the ethnic parish, unlike several others that underwent a similar process.