

## The World's Biggest College Town

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On a gray Friday in January, a largely empty church on 121st Street and Broadway was immaculate in the way of a rarely used living room. Even on a slushy winter morning, Corpus Christi's floors gleamed.

At noon sharp, in the rectory next door, the Rev. Raymond Rafferty, the church's pastor, leaned forward, checked his watch and told The Observer gently, "Now, I really have to go." He had to prepare for the 12:10 Mass. The church holds services at least once daily during the week, and four times on Sunday. But the nave, which holds 400 people, is rarely full.

Once, Corpus Christi would have towered over the neighboring apartment buildings. But now it sits literally in the shadows of Columbia's Teachers' College across 121st Street, yet another totem of the university's swallowing of its upper Manhattan neighborhood.

Columbia, in fact, owns every building on both sides of the street, save for one co-op and the church. And several blocks to the northwest, the university is undertaking a massive 17-acre expansion into West Harlem that will inevitably mean years of demolitions and noisy construction. When it's finished, Columbia will have transformed an area once filled with auto mechanics and small manufacturers into a modern day "piazza," as its architect, the Italian Renzo Piano, describes it.

SLIDESHOW: E=MC Awesome: An Exclusive Look at Columbia's New Manhattanville Science Center

According to the most recent tax assessment rolls, provided by the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance and analyzed by The Observer, Columbia and N.Y.U. have amassed valuable properties rivaling the Catholic Church's long-held portfolio. The market value of city property owned by each of the three institutions appears to hover around \$1.5 billion, based on the assessment rolls. The Catholic Church still claims a slight lead, but N.Y.U. and Columbia trail by only a couple of hundred million dollars each, and will almost certainly eclipse the church soon.

Though exact numbers are impossible to attain (the universities and the church own numerous properties under different registered names, and there are in total more than 11,000 registered property owners in the city), they clearly show that the gap has narrowed. Moreover, given the downward trends for membership in major religious organizations in the United States, time is on the universities' side.

New York City, which even a decade ago boasted a strong (and strongly religious) manufacturing working class, has rapidly become a wonkhub of nearly 600,000 post-high school students, according to the last census. The academic expansion in the city has come at the same time that the Catholic Church—once New York's largest private landlord and community presence—has confronted decline. In neighborhoods like Father Rafferty's, the role reversal is startling, with colleges starting to elbow out the church for space and influence. "New York is an intellectual city," said Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban planning at New York University (and an Observer contributor). "People want to study in New York. You have to recognize how much this has really changed."

While the Catholic Church, like other major religious organizations, struggles with declining resources and attendance, universities are scrambling to find room to grow. Father Rafferty, who before Corpus Christi was a New York University chaplain for almost a decade, smiles kindly when he talks about Columbia's reign over the neighborhood. "I understand the need for expansion," he said. "But you also need to think about the community you're expanding into."

He does not blame the university for any decline in church membership. "It's not their direct intention to cause that," Father Rafferty said. "Some of this is driven by society changing, and the failure of churches to evangelize, welcome newcomers, and scandals within the church."

For decades, Corpus Christi has, in fact, enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with its Ivy League neighbor. While a student at Columbia in the 1930s, for instance, Thomas Merton, later to become one of the 20th century's most famous Catholics as an author and lecturer, was baptized there, and young people still approach Father Rafferty asking to be christened after reading Merton's memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. But starting in the '60s and '70s, partly because of its neighbor's growing population of students and faculty, Corpus Christi watched its membership drop (though it has climbed slightly in the past decade). Apartment buildings once filled with strongly Catholic Irish and Hispanic immigrants have become housing for undergrads and their TAs, who may or may not see the need for Catholic theology or organized religion in general.

The church still controls some of the city's most valuable real estate. Amid the anxious consumerism of Fifth Avenue, St. Patrick's Cathedral rises largely unchanged over the past 150 years. When the church bought this land in 1810, in what was then the countrified city limits, "People thought it was a folly," said Paul Moses, a journalism professor at Brooklyn College, who's reported on the Catholic Church for decades. But the church's understanding of demographics, its insight into the rhythms of birth, marriage and death in New York, was unmatched. The cathedral cost about \$4 million to build, and now St. Patrick's, which is also the seat of the archbishop of New York, has more than \$191 million in assets, making it one of the 150 biggest landowners on the city's assessment rolls.

But even as the value of St. Patrick's and other church properties has skyrocketed, many other Catholic parishes are in dire financial straits. "The church is land-rich and cash-poor," said one person familiar with its holdings. "There is no question many of the properties are an economic drain." Many of the buildings should be demolished, the source added, but a lot still enjoy "prime, prime locations."

Though baptized Catholics still make up roughly 40 percent of the New York City population, according to researchers, church attendance is down locally 20 percent over the past decade (a challenge faced by many other mainstream Christian denominations), and the church has also faced diminishing enrollment in parochial schools. The archdiocese of New York, which includes Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island as well as several upstate counties, announced in 2007 that it would close two parishes and merge six with others-although a spokesman noted that the situation is ongoing and all are being used as worship sites.

The archdiocese also recently announced that 27 of 185 schools will close this year-the biggest reorganization in its history-including five schools that will close or merge in Manhattan. Since the closing of St. Vincent's in early 2010, no Catholic hospitals are left in any of the five boroughs. "Within the church," Mr. Moses said, "there's a real effort being made to use real estate as an asset. They're facing such financial difficulties, and [real estate] will help them develop a solid financial base."

The decisions can be heartbreaking, and sometimes deeply divisive. Closing a school or church is "like a death," said Timothy King, a real estate agent at CPEX Realty, who has helped the church manage some of its assets. "The cardinal and bishop give a lot of prayerful consideration to all of these matters," he said, "to have an outcome that's going to assure the long-term benefit for everyone."

On Sunday, The Brooklyn Paper reported that the Brooklyn diocese, which includes Queens as well, called in three squad cars to oversee the last Mass at Our Lady of Montserrat in Bedford-Stuyvesant, which was closed, as scheduled, a day later. Its pastor, the Rev. Jim O'Shea, had vocally opposed the closing, backed by a number of parishioners. "It's a complete shame that instead of making an appearance and thanking the community, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio sent the police in fear that people would protest because they know the truth behind the closure is political," one worshiper told The Paper.

Meanwhile, Bishop DiMarzio put out a statement saying he was "deeply aware of the sacrifice that these changes mean for those who worship in these churches."

Even after closing parishes or schools, the church usually chooses to hold on to its assets, sometimes leasing them to other institutions such as charter schools. The demographics could still change, and the church has also perhaps learned from the tragic example of St. Vincent's Hospital, a Village institution run by the Sisters of Charity that the church sold off ward by ward until it was forced to close the entire hospital. A plan by the hospital and developer Rudin Management to build condos that would help support St. Vincent's buckled under community opposition.

As the case of St. Vincent's illustrates, finding new uses for the buildings is also not easy: What good is a church as anything other than a church? "Unless at some point we're in need of a leper colony, prison or mental asylum," a source said, the buildings are "functionally obsolete."

The church's decline affects us all. For nearly a century, religious institutions stood between many New Yorkers and desperation. "The church was extremely important in helping in the rebuilding of New York City," said former mayor Ed Koch, who recognized early on in his political career the importance of reaching out to Catholic voters, especially the so-called white ethnic ones in the outer boroughs. "And it remains extremely important in delivering services. The Catholic Church is No. 1 in the delivery of social services, better than what the civil service can do."

As N.Y.U. and Columbia rise to dominance, will their presence be as benign?

The universities have both embarked on their biggest expansion plans in over 100 years, and their respective neighborhoods' opposition has been closely chronicled. N.Y.U. plans to grow its campus by more than 40 percent, adding 3 million-plus square feet in Greenwich Village, an engineering school in Brooklyn and a satellite campus on Governors Island. The main campus of the school-at more than 22,000 undergraduates, the largest private college in the U.S.-is already situated in one of the most densely populated areas of the city.

Stone churches once rose a couple of stories above their neighbors; N.Y.U. plans to build space equaling the Empire State Building in Greenwich Village, which critics say will dwarf its surroundings.

Columbia has also announced a \$6.3 billion expansion plan that will add 6.8 million square feet of additional classrooms and other facilities, including the 17-acre West Harlem campus. The new campus will almost certainly drive up property values and make it more difficult for members of the working-

class neighborhood to continue living there. Some clergy have raised objections that the plans do not include affordable housing on the site of the campus.

Even as Columbia grows and the church's influence wanes, it is hardly a neatly plotted story of the university triumphing at the expense of the church. It's more like two stories running parallel in the same setting. Columbia even met with local clergy when beginning its expansion efforts nearly a decade ago, but it did not go well: Some clergy stopped attending. "The situation has been compared to David and Goliath," said the Rev. Earl Kooperkamp of St. Mary's Episcopal Church on 126th Street and Amsterdam. "All David had to do was take Goliath off the field. ... How do you get Goliath to sit down, make peace and be a good neighbor?"

New Yorkers will have to make peace with the new Goliaths rising in their midst. Universities and colleges already control more than 22 percent of office space in New York City, according to Cassidy Turley, including 72 million square feet in Manhattan. Columbia's holdings totaled 19.6 million square feet, and N.Y.U. owns 15 million feet, according to the report. "These universities have become powerhouses financially," Mr. Moses, the journalism professor at Brooklyn College, said. "The churches don't seem to command that kind of influence. They're begging foundations to keep their schools alive.

"You are talking about money," he added. "Universities have lots of money and the churches don't."

The question remains: Can universities step in to fill the gap left by a declining church, providing education, hospitals and a sense of community, given the relentless hustle in this city?

"Universities help add to the city's quality of life," Mr. Moss, of N.Y.U., said. "Within the university, you have seminars, theater groups, lectures. They become an important part of the city's fabric."

Much like the role the Catholic Church once filled? "Yes, exactly like that."

But when The Observer floated the same idea to the Rev. Thomas Shelley, a professor of Catholic history at Fordham, he laughed gently. "The main business of the church is religion," he said. "Universities don't do that and aren't expected to do it."