

A REFLECTION: FROM THE LAST 50 YEARS TO THE NEXT

As I am marking my 50th year as an ordained priest, people have asked me what significant things have impressed me in those fifty years. Certainly there are many, but for some reason that question directs my focus instead to the years to come -- the next fifty years. What trends have those of us ordained for fifty years noticed that will likely shape the Church of the next half century? My own experience suggests these indicators for the future:

1. The next 50 years will see the tragic and continuing diminishment of Christianity. The signs are clear; churches are closing, merging and fading. Budgets are shrinking and programs and staff continue to be cut. Church attendance will continue to drop across all denominations. Among those born since 1979, the religious category called "none" is now the majority category. Guilt is no longer a determining factor for Sunday worship, there are more and more other things to do on weekends, and people travel as never before. Also there is the rise of do-it-yourself Christianity, and social media allows believers to tailor a spiritual life to their own liking, often without the challenge of having to interact with other Christians. In addition, there is the familiar mantra among our younger generations that "I'm spiritual but not religious."

2. The Catholic church-going will continue its downward spiral. Our churches, especially in Europe, are emptying. The familiar long lines at the confessional began to vanish, even prior to Vatican II. And what happened to the norm that Catholic couples must be married - and married before a priest and two witnesses? That sense of keeping the Church's strict marriage rules has all but disappeared. Is infant baptism the next to go?

The shortage of priests will continue. Worldwide, the numbers have been dropping since the 1930's. And as Catholic sociologists argued decades ago, the priest shortage is irreversible. Retirements and deaths are the culprits. Young men are increasingly less interested in pursuing a life that requires mandatory celibacy, a requirement lacking any credible explanation. The clergy sex abuse scandal has also done untold damage to the image of the Catholic priesthood. There is a number of solutions to the vocation shortage, but popes and bishops persist in keeping their heads buried in the sand. Their constant encouragement to "pray for vocations" in light of the obvious solutions is an insult to the meaning of prayer. There is some indication that Francis will allow some limited ordination of married men, but until then the weekly celebration of the liturgy, central to our Catholic Christian identity, will continue to be held hostage by mandatory celibacy.

3. In the next decades more and more people will become aware of the dysfunction and inadequacies of the institutional Church. The authority of the Catholic Church will continue to erode, particularly for the younger generations. What are the causes of this erosion? There are many factors at work, beginning really with the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition. Then people began, and continue doing so now, to question assumptions, especially to question what so many perceive to be the Church's neurotic need to control the truth.

Analysts of religion point out that in modern times this Enlightenment spirit was no more remarkably demonstrated than with the wholesale ignoring of the 1968 papal encyclical letter condemning birth

control. Thinking Catholics simply refused to buy into a solemn teaching that made no sense. The days of blind obedience were over.

And the fear of Hell no longer held sway. It is precisely this fear of eternal punishment that served as a control mechanism over Catholic Christians for many, many centuries. That threat of losing one's soul is still evident in the familiar Act of Contrition, where we confess to "detesting all my sins because of thy just punishments." That same prayer also proclaims that our sins "offend" God. What thinking person wants such a weak God that would be offended by my mere human failings? Religion, if it is to survive in today's times, must be clearly perceived to be more than just "measuring up" so as to avoid eternal flames.

4. People will continue to turn from the Church and nourish their spiritual yearnings elsewhere, and so the challenge to the institutional Church will be to offer that nourishment in ways that attract our young people. Thus liturgy must be inviting and compelling, always marked by excellent preaching. Lousy homilies are deadly and will continue to be killers of faith.

5. Doctrine must be expressed in ways that make sense to people, or else be regarded as irrelevant to the lives of younger Catholics. e.g., mandatory celibacy, participation of women in ministry, and the policies and practices that needlessly limit the presence of women in decision-making roles.

Priests must be pastoral and loving persons, able to listen and to be gracious. As Pope Francis suggests, there can be no room for priests who are doctrinal and liturgical sheriffs, inflexible with rules and regulations, and are far too full of themselves and their ontological change. Ordination is meant for loving service, not for ego inflation or personal exaltation of any sort.

6. Doctrines, norms and traditions that appear to be based on Catholic fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible must be revisited and reformulated. Literalism always misleads. Such doctrines are found by increasing numbers of good Catholic people to be stumbling blocks to faith and common sense. This is particularly true as more and more people learn about the historical and critical meaning of the biblical texts, meanings that our biblical scholars have known about for well over 100 years but kept under wraps for various reasons. Examples of such doctrines would include how Catholics should interpret the Bible, the role of myth and prophesy, the definition of God, the Trinity, Original Sin, the Incarnation, the role of Mary, miracles, the atonement theory of salvation, the Eucharistic presence, the meaning of the sacrifice of the cross, the role of Peter and the subsequent papacy, infallibility, teachings on human sexuality, the history of patriarchy in the Church, etc.

Unless such theological issues are revisited, reformed, reformulated or replaced, theologians will become just museum curators. Let's face it. There needs to be a new "reformation," implying much more than that word originally meant. Unless such topics are thoroughly re-examined and expressed anew in light of contemporary understanding and culture, people will continue to walk away. The famous psychiatrist Carl Jung pointed out decades ago that the days of sacrificing our intellect for the sake of religion are over. It is simply unhealthy to make "excessive effort to believe, when the object of the belief is no longer inherently convincing."

Dead doctrines and traditions are just not life-giving, and people are looking for life. That was the reason why Jesus came in the first place: "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly."

Jesus did not leave us with a set of doctrines and dogmas and creeds, but with a way of life, centering on compassion and love. One should note that the Creed, which Catholics are mandated to recite practically every Sunday of the year, contains nothing of what Jesus said and did, no mention of love, no mention of the beatitudes or the kingdom, or of God as the ground of life -- only a list of what committees of males decided on by vote at ancient Church councils.

7. Now the good news! Since the election of Pope Francis there is a lot of hope in the wind. The thrust and focus of his ministry has been on mercy, rather than on enforcing rules and doctrines, as important as these might be. There is hope that Francis will become the template for future popes. There is also the good news that more Francis-inspired seminarians and priests are on the rise. Our pope also champions the elimination of the disease of clericalism and is committed to the vision of Vatican II as regards collegiality and synodality -- a conciliar vision to which the previous two popes gave scant attention. This pope is also replacing retired and deceased bishops with men who are pastoral, alert to social justice issues, and unafraid to speak their mind. As Andrew Greeley used to say, "Bishops have been the taillights of the Church. We need bishops who are headlights."

As we move into the first years of this next half century, we will see even more clearly that Catholic Christianity is not about religion, with its doctrines and rules and traditions; it is about life. Religion, with its various institutions and traditions, is there to help us maintain our Kingdom focus, providing us with the required biblical and corporate vision of justice and solidarity. So we look in a new way at the biblical portrait of Jesus and see that portrait now in terms of *being*, not *doing*. Whatever the inadequacies of the institutional Church, the following of Jesus is always central.

Christianity is a way to enter more deeply into the mystery of God, and into what it means to be fully human. That is why early Christians referred to themselves as "The Way." We follow Jesus precisely because he is the doorway into God, the route, the path into God. To meet Jesus, to come to know him, is to discover what God is like. And to enter through this doorway into the divine is to become deeply and fully human. Herein lies the hope for our future.



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