

May 16, 2007 - Catholic church should give laypeople bigger role

Guest Opinion: Tom O'Brien, News-Press (FL)

Although the documents of the Second Vatican Council held out the promise of greater lay participation in the administration of the Catholic Church, by and large it has not happened, and the Church is the poorer for it. It is generally held that had laymen and laywomen been intimately involved at the highest levels of Church administration in the dioceses both here and abroad, the clerical sex abuse of children would have been dealt with definitively years ago. Fathers and mothers privy to the inner workings of diocesan administration would not have allowed the pedophilia to become epidemic.

The only upside of that tragedy has been the birth of many Catholic lay movements, including the Voice of the Faithful, Call to Action and others, working to make the thrust of Vatican II truly incarnate. But there is pushback from many bishops who wield their ecclesiastical authority as if they were monarchs. They are confident of the support of the Vatican, whose frequent pronouncements are accepted by some of the laity as if they were infallible when, in fact, they are not. There have been many changes in the Church's definitive positions on moral issues down through the ages, thank God!

That is not to say the Church has not been on the right track in many instances, especially in its championing of social justice for the poor and the immigrant and its opposition to capital punishment. I am nearly finished attending a remarkable program called Just Faith at my parish in Fort Myers. The pastoral staff there conducts a series of classes which focus attention on the poor and present tangible methods of both identifying the problem and providing assistance. Some of the participants in the 30-week program have traveled to Nicaragua and Haiti to work with the poor and others have become involved with helping Immokalee farm workers and their families.

But the Church locally, nationally and internationally, continues to be run by male-dominated regimes unwilling at times to listen to its theologians, its parish priests and its people, most of whom have never accepted some of its fallible pronouncements. For example, *Humanae Vitae*, the birth control encyclical, was issued over the objections of 90 percent of the cardinals, theologians and lay experts participating in those deliberations.

Some would say the Church is not a democracy, yet the Pope's election by the College of Cardinals is, in fact, a democratic process, perhaps the only one in the Church. Benedict XVI was not elected on the first ballot.

Rigid enforcement of *Humanae Vitae*, using the threat of eternal damnation, is contributing to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of African women being infected by their HIV-infected husbands.

Although the American hierarchy has reluctantly accepted lay oversight regarding its compliance with the Program for the Protection of Children and Young People, that seems to be the limit of their willingness to be monitored by the laity or to embrace real lay participation in their decision-making. The recent accounts of misuse and theft of parish funds amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars obviates the need for laity involvement in the management of finances. Bishop Dennis M. Schnurr, treasurer of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, cited a need to look for mechanisms that can assist parishes in accountability and transparency.

Many of the hierarchy are canon lawyers who tend to be enforcers without regard to the validity of the man-made rules they are enforcing, including the stubborn, theologically unsupportable prohibition of married and female priests, thereby depriving many faithful of access to the Eucharist. Those who are theologians tend to be more pastoral, i.e., understanding of the human condition and less likely to flex their ecclesiastical muscle in a church that is 99.9 percent laypeople working out their salvation as best they can.

Until this year, the Diocese of Venice enjoyed the benign, largely hands-off leadership of Bishop John Nevins, which allowed the laity to grow in the Spirit. His successor, Frank J. Dewane, ordained in 1988 and straight from years of Vatican service, is proving to be a different kind of leader. Some of his initial official acts do not augur well for the Church in Southwest Florida.

The banning of a respected Catholic theologian from church property in Naples and the banning of yoga at a Fort Myers church forced parishioners, denied legitimate use of their own turf, to go to Protestant churches to hear the theologian and practice their yoga.

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