

Inside or outside church structures, Catholics engage change

by Joe Feuerhrd, Washington, National Catholic Reporter, October 6, 2006

Recently two Catholic gatherings were separated by 25 miles and five days. In fact, they were worlds apart.

The first meeting, held on a balmy late summer Saturday in a nondescript suburban Washington hotel, had a more narrow agenda if the broader title -- "Catholics: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow." Sponsored by the Brunswick, Maine-based group Celibacy Is the Issue, it drew more than 100 participants, including married priests who once served the institutional church but now offer their sacramental services less formally through the group's "rent-a-priest" program.

The message: A celibate, secretive clergy is at the root of what ails the church.

"Secrecy is as much a 'mark of the church,' as the official four: one, holy, Catholic and apostolic," Fr. Thomas Doyle told the group. Doyle knows secrets. The Dominican priest and canon lawyer was privy to the clergy sex abuse files at the Vatican Embassy in the mid-1980s. He now testifies frequently on behalf of abuse victims who sue the hierarchy.

The second conference -- "The Catholic Church in America: 2006" -- was a wide-ranging two-day exploration of today's U.S. church sponsored by The Catholic University of America's Life Cycle Institute. It included a healthy dose of nostalgia about a church that is no more, and equal parts fear and hope -- based on sociological and demographic data -- of what it might become.

To be sure, there was crossover between the two gatherings. Both were overwhelmingly white and predominantly gray-haired, what Catholic University sociologist William D'Antonio terms the "pre-Vatican II generation." For all the discussion of a browner and younger church of the future, few in those cohorts made it to either meeting.

At The Catholic University conference, D'Antonio offered a nostalgic reflection both groups could identify with: "Pius XII [1939-1958] was the pope, and there were no theological battles, not openly anyway. No arguments about abortion, stem cells, and 'gay' meant having a fun time. Seventy-five percent of all Catholics went to Sunday Mass; if we did not we were sure going to hell. And we went to Communion after going to confession. We knew the Baltimore Catechism, and accepted what the bishops decided. In my neighborhood a mixed marriage meant an Italian marrying Irish."

Both conferences shared a commitment to "church" -- an organized community of believers. But defining exactly what that community is, who should lead it, and the boundaries it should observe separated the two meetings.

Like wary waders approaching chilly water, many of the Celibacy Is the Issue congregants dip a toe or more into the institutional church. Nearby St. Rose of Lima Parish, home to one of two Voice of the Faithful affiliates in the Washington archdiocese, was, for example, well-represented at the Celibacy Is the Issue gathering.

But they're still the outsiders. The closing Mass was celebrated by Fr. Philip Cerrato, a married priest active in Celibacy Is the Issue's rent-a-priest program.

By contrast, The Catholic University crowd -- academics, activists, parish volunteers and professionals, women religious and priests -- have both feet firmly in the institutional church. Liberal, moderate and conservative (both Opus Dei and Voice of the Faithful were represented) whatever change they envision will occur largely within the institution.

"How do a group of people know if they're in a period of reformation?" asked psychotherapist Richard Sipe. History, said the former Benedictine monk and seminary professor, provides a guide.

The 16th-century Reformation, Sipe told the Celibacy Is the Issue audience, was marked by advances in communications (the creation of movable type), increased education among the laity, awareness of financial and sexual corruption in the church, and theological controversies.

Sound familiar?

At the root of today's sexual abuse scandals, said Sipe, is "a clerical culture . free from accountability." It is this "culture of entitlement," the belief "that I'm not like anybody else" that "kept so many men from seeing the elephant in the sanctuary," said Sipe.

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, keynote speaker at The Catholic University conference, offered a different analysis. What ails the church, he said, results from "the ethos of the '60s." It was a decade, said the former Washington archbishop, "that changed the whole way we look at life." And not for the better.

"We became a contraceptive society," fearful of commitment, said McCarrick. Sex became just another commodity, Sunday Mass an option, Catholic education no longer worth the sacrifice, religious education a place where children "learned how to sing songs" rather than the meaning of the sacraments. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was misinterpreted by those who said that "we must open up to everything." One result of the tumult: The church was ill-prepared to deal with sex abuse issues when they arose publicly in the late 1980s, said McCarrick.

Catholic University sociologist Dean Hoge added data to the opinions. In a series of surveys conducted over nearly 20 years, Hoge and his colleagues asked Catholics what is "essential" about their faith.

"In every assessment, Catholic laity reported that sacraments and charity toward the poor were central to their understanding of the essence of Catholicism," Hoge said at The Catholic University conference. "Devotion to Mary the Mother of God was almost as central. Creedal beliefs such as Jesus' resurrection were central. By contrast, other elements came out consistently low: specific moral teachings about the death penalty and abortion, and specific church rules, for example, requiring personal confession or saying that only celibate men could be priests."

From their very different perspectives, McCarrick and Sipe share one belief: Change is coming. The U.S. church's growing Hispanic population, said McCarrick, has "a sense of the church that many of us have lost." The "renewal in Catholic education" presents a "new frontier" of opportunity, he said. The "age of the laity" envisioned by Vatican II and Opus Dei founder St. Josemaría Escrivá is here, said McCarrick. He noted the presence of women on Vatican congregations and in high-ranking positions in diocesan bureaucracies as signs of progress.

Five days prior to the McCarrick keynote, Sipe told the Celibacy Is the Issue audience: "You are a reformation."

If clericalism is the chief culprit in the church's ills then it is a problem with a potential solution in the making: the priest shortage.

Said Hoge: "Let us look ahead 20 years, when the number of priests is down by about 25 percent, the number of Catholics is up by over 20 percent, and the number of professional lay ministers is up by 25 to 50 percent. Parishes will be run by lay staff and lay committees more than by priests. Many parishes won't have a resident priest."

It's already happening.

"Today," David DeLambo, associate director of pastoral planning for the diocese of Cleveland, told The Catholic University audience, "the number of lay parish ministers in paid positions on parish pastoral staffs (30,632) exceeds the number of priests in parish ministry. By some estimates, it is nearly double. And the number of lay parish ministers continues to grow. Whereas 54 percent of parishes employed lay parish ministers in 1990, two-thirds of parishes employ them today." Highly educated, predominantly female, and familiar with local concerns (many volunteered in the same parishes where they are now employed), the growth of parish lay ministry, said DeLambo, represents a "development of revolutionary proportions."

Still, one person's revolution is another's slowly ebbing status quo --too little, too late, never enough.

Thousands of American Catholics have abandoned the institutional church --not for mainline Protestant denominations or evangelical churches or even Sunday afternoon football. Instead, Regis College sociologist Kathleen Kautzer told the Celibacy Is the Issue gathering, they seek out communities that have the look, feel and even smell of Catholicism without formal ties to the established hierarchy. Kautzer is completing a book on the phenomenon.

Prompted by the unfulfilled promises of Vatican II, the abuse scandal, and for a myriad of other reasons, they are the outliers, the hardliners reflected in Hoge's surveys: They explicitly reject such "specific church rules" as the celibate male priesthood. And they're growing in number. Kautzer has identified 14 "networks of independent Catholic churches," ranging from the Polish National Catholic Church and the Reformed Catholic Church to the Catholic Diocese of One Spirit and the 5,000-member Ecumenical Catholic Communion. Most endorse a non-celibate priesthood open to both men and women.

Also on the underground church continuum are the 20 Celibacy Is the Issue communities nationwide where married

clergy celebrate the sacraments; liturgical communities sponsored by Call to Action activists that "have evolved into underground churches"; nuns "from several communities" who conduct their own priestless liturgical services; and parish communities such as Spiritus Christi in Rochester, N.Y., that now operate outside formal church structures.

Younger American Catholics -- those born after Vatican II -- do not generally challenge "creedal beliefs such as the Resurrection, and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, about Mary, and about the fundamental teaching about the poor," said D'Antonio. But they "do not see as core elements any of the teachings on human sexuality, or on clerical celibacy or women priests, or how parishes are run, or the importance of celebrating the sacraments regularly."

Meanwhile, more than 50 percent of U.S. Catholics under the age of 25 and 25 percent of those active in diocesan ministry programs are of Hispanic descent. The values, beliefs and ties to the institutional church that this growing population of U.S. Catholics will bring to the church is a huge sociological unknown, though McCarrick and others voiced the hope that it would be more in line with traditional church practice than the attitudes explored by Hoge, D'Antonio and Kautzer.

The tension that exists, said Doyle, is between those who value the "survival of the monarchical model and the clerical aristocracy" over the "emergence of the community of believers." Said Doyle, "In numbers that are alarming and threatening to [the hierarchy], Catholic adults are not shedding their brains and their maturity when they walk into church or when they approach a cleric."

Said McCarrick: "I only see what I see and when all is said and done, your guess is as good as mine."

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