NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The church of magical thinking

Jamie Manson | Mar. 12, 2009

For Roman Catholics seeking reform in their church, it might be fair to call this season the winter of their discontent.

In early February, the front page of *The New York Times* reported on the church?s new offering of indulgences. This piece came on the heels of another cover story about the pope?s decision to lift the excommunications of four schismatic bishops who reject the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

These actions arrived after a summer highlighted by the placing of a severe **interdict against Sr. Louise Lears** [1] that banished her from her ministry and from receiving the sacraments, and an autumn colored by **the excommunication of Maryknowll Fr. Roy Bourgeois** [2]. Both were punished as a result of their open support of the ordination of women.

Traditionalists were welcomed back to the dinner table, while those seeking to expand the guest list were sent away hungry.

At the same time, the faithful were given new opportunities to reduce their time in purgatory by days or years. They could even have their purgatorial sentence revoked via the plenary indulgence (assuming, of course, no additional sins are committed). Though they cannot be bought (such practices were outlawed in 1567), indulgences can be earned through charitable contributions and good works (limit one indulgence per sin per day).

Psychologists define ?magical thinking? as the belief that one?s thoughts, words, or actions can exert more power or influence over events than one actually has.

Lately I?m wondering if some of those in the church?s leadership aren?t struggling with a serious case of it. Not only are they assuming power that belongs to God alone, they are using functions like excommunication and indulgences on a people for whom these realities are no longer relevant or real. Indulgences and excommunications only create barriers between people and the understanding they seek, and they drive the church into an ever-deepening irrelevance, especially for younger generations.

The church has lost its power over the people through its unwillingness to meet human beings where they are. Anyone who argues that this is not the work of the church needs to wrestle with the mystery of the Incarnation: God?s great act of taking on human flesh, meeting us where we are, in order to seek a deeper communion with us. Though they left the Medieval worldview regarding their faith decades ago, people today are no less in need of guidance and support in finding a spiritual path, in answering timeless questions about God and suffering, and in seeking out deeper understandings of life?s purpose. The people of God are starving for meaning, and all the church seems willing to deliver is magical thinking.

Asked why the church was once again promoting the need for indulgences, Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, said, ?Because there is sin in the world.? But, really, is there any greater sin than willfully separating

a human being from the love of God? Welcoming people to the table, regardless of their beliefs, their sins, their sanctimoniousness, was the central purpose of Jesus? ministry in this world. That the Roman Catholic hierarchy seems bent on undoing the work of the Incarnate God is not simply sad, it is profoundly erroneous.

But God always finds a way to break through the barriers.

In my recent travels, I had the powerful opportunity to listen to a member of Sr. Louise Lears? parish tell the story of the nun?s attending Mass on the first Sunday after she was placed under interdict. Her 85-year old mother was at her side. Not wanting to jeopardize the parish any further, Sr. Louise followed behind her mother as she went up to receive Communion. Her mother took Communion, broke it, turned around and gave it to her daughter. After witnessing this, Sr. Louise?s sister, Kate, and many other parishioners went and did the same. By the end of communion, Sr. Louise?s hands were filled with fragments of the Eucharist. After the Mass was over, as the family was standing in the back, Louise?s mother said to her daughter, ?I was the first person to feed you, and I will feed you now.?

O, Church, where is your victory? O, Hierarchy, where is your sting?

Though the church may attempt to magically separate the children of God from the table of God, Eucharist will always rise out of the people. True presence, true Communion becomes real not by the will of church authorities, but through the loving will of God. The power belongs to God and God alone. If our church leaders had their minds and hearts centered in God, rather than on their own power, they would realize that they were truly powerless when it comes to determining who is entitled to be a recipient of God?s presence in this world. They would realize the absurdity of even assuming such a power. God breaks through, regardless of the defenses we construct.

The church hierarchy seems to have an unhealthy attachment to its power. Surrendering every now and then to the power of God might do them some good. At the very least ? and this is no small thing ? it would keep God?s people from being sent away empty. Perhaps if God were given the chance to have God?s way from the outset, the church would encourage the four schismatic bishops, Sr. Louise, and Fr. Roy to sit at the dinner table as equals, not with the mistaken understanding that any of them had any power over the other, but rather in an authentic effort to make God more fully present to one another.

And then perhaps, to paraphrase Shakespeare again, the winter of our discontent could begin to change into a glorious summer.

Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City?s homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women?s Ordination Conference.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/10/2014 - 00:35*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/church-magical-thinking

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/1330
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/2617