

The grieving church

Richard McBrien | Apr. 27, 2009 Essays in Theology

I received an e-mail recently from a lay pastoral associate, whose ministerial focus is on adult education and who possesses a graduate degree from a Catholic university. I have his permission to cite a portion of our exchange.

I have suppressed some of the details lest his pastor identify the source and seek to jeopardize the pastoral associate's job.

The e-mail came from a large suburban parish in which the pastor has apparently done everything that he can to remove most traces of the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council.

The pastor has done away with all contemporary music at Mass, and has restored pre-conciliar devotions along with auricular confession. He even gives the impression that confession is the greatest of the sacraments.

Perhaps there is some misunderstanding here because the Council of Trent, back in the 16th century, made clear that the greatest of the seven sacraments is the Eucharist.

Under the pastor's control, the parish has no youth ministry, no parish council, nor any other consultative body. According to my correspondent, "consultative" is not in his vocabulary. He also gave vocal support to the minority of U.S. Catholic bishops who proclaimed in effect that "Catholics could burn in hell" if they voted Democratic in the recent presidential election.

My correspondent reported that other members of the parish staff are hurting "terribly." Indeed, they share the feelings of the woman who darted out of church recently during the homily "in tears."

She informed the pastoral associate that she could no longer handle the situation, and that she had to leave the parish. She said that all that she ever hears from the pulpit is what sinners the parishioners are, and why it is so necessary for them to "go to Confession."

That particular Sunday, with the old-fashioned church music, all the statues covered in purple as they were before Vatican II, and the usual severe words in the homily, the pressure was simply too much for her to bear.

The woman poured out her frustrations, saying that the pastor had taken the parish back to a church that she knows nothing about and in a manner that showed no understanding of others' feelings.

At the end of his first e-mail, my correspondent asked, "Are we expected just to get used to it?"

In my reply, I wrote: "No, you are not simply to 'get used to it'. Parishioners need to go elsewhere, like the woman who left Mass in tears."

I continued: "If there are no parishes or other worshipping communities in the vicinity where the pastoral leadership is healthy rather than driven by a narrow ideology, then one simply has to 'take a vacation' from the

church until the skies finally clear and we are bathed in sunlight once again.?

In response, the pastoral associate noted that ?the number of our parish families who are already on vacation from the church is amazing. It hurts to see it.?

?It?s new territory, dealing with people grieving for their church,? he wrote.

The lead article in *America* magazine?s 100th anniversary issue (4/13/09) is by a Dominican who is justly admired the world over. It is Timothy Radcliffe?s ?The Shape of the Church to Come.?

What follows here is a continued commentary on the problem of the ?grieving church? and not meant as a criticism of Timothy Radcliffe?s fine article in which he deplores the polarization that is ?deeply wounding and inhibits the flourishing of the church.?

However, he does identify this polarization as consisting of self-defined ?traditionalist? Catholics in open conflict with self-defined ?progressive? Catholics.

My experience with the worldwide Catholic church is surely much more limited than Timothy Radcliffe?s, and I would defer to his experience if indeed he has come across a significant number of Catholics who actually identify themselves as ?progressive.? On the other hand, I know of countless numbers of Catholics who proudly call themselves ?traditional? or ?orthodox.?

The pastor in the true story above surely would regard himself as ?orthodox,? but the woman who left the church in tears would never have defined herself as a ?progressive? Catholic. That adjective would mean nothing to her.

She and other Catholics like her grieve simply for the loss of their church, a church renewed and reformed by Vatican II.

It is not polarization but the pastor of the story and many like him who are responsible for the grieving church.

Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O?Brien professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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