

The 'Catholic moment,' not

Ken Briggs | May. 20, 2009 NCR Today

Well, is this the advertised "Catholic moment" or not? The late Richard John Neuhaus told us it was coming to fill up the vacuum caused by the steely-eyed secularists who drove religion out of the public square.

Everything would come together to usher it in the golden age. The Pope, John Paul II, was hailed as a world leader who could turn countries like Poland around. The backlash against Vatican II had stiffened Catholicism's resolve to press ahead with a "clear" agenda that replaced the "confusion" of conciliar "liberals." America was allegedly losing its moral legs and spiritual anchors, making room for the certainty delivered by Catholic evangelists.

George W. Bush, whose own religious identity was foggy, save a rhetorical attachment to the evangelicals, no doubt saw the inherent conservatism of "moment" thinking as a good idea. To Neuhaus and other theocons, then, indicators read "Go" for a Catholic boom to straighten things out. The many elements would cohere. It would be U.S. Catholicism's place in the sun when the soil of American democracy would finally be receptive to the seeds of Catholic conviction.

But the expected boom has gone bust. Kaput. It wasn't in the forecast.

If the moment means visibility, we're in it now. But if it means success in ordinary institutional terms, I'm afraid it's an imposter.

What we're seeing is a far cry from what Neuhaus envisioned as a blossoming of authentic Catholicism for an age eager to embrace it. More native-born Americans are leaving the church than joining it; doubts and mistrust swirl around bishops and priests as never before in our history; Catholic theology is one among many contributors to Christian thinking but is no leader of the pack.

Nothing ruined this vision more perhaps than the scandal involving priests and children. It goes on, accruing more dirt as it rolls along, injecting skepticism and sarcasm among lay people toward clerics in general, including the many innocent ones. This obviously doesn't create converts.

Neither does the current pope. Whereas his predecessor might have oversold some of the church's wares at times, Benedict XVI is the consummate church insider who depletes Catholicism's energies rather than replenishes them. Some regions of the church -- principally Africa -- allegedly make big numerical gains even without that inspiration from the top. But if Africa is deemed evidence that the moment has arrived, I'd beg for a postponement in judgment. The test will come as Africa becomes developed and subject to the choices and debates that emerge within democratic societies of prosperity, scientific thinking, and choice.

That brings up the biggest bugaboo, authority. It's beginning to look like the American bishops have spent their limited moral and spiritual capital unwisely. They have banked on a narrow agenda and lost. Child abuse cover-ups by some of them did enormous damage to their credibility. Hewing to a hard Vatican line further eroded

their power. Then came the Notre Dame fiasco where about 70 of them hoped to scold the university into disinviting Obama to graduation. They failed miserably and in so doing their weakness was exposed. As David Gibson wrote in the *Washington Post*, most Catholics decide on their own what they will follow and what they won't without heeding the crowd that promised a "Catholic moment" because Catholics are the mainstream of America.

If there is a moment, it is the reverse of what was conjured, dark and fraught with uncertainty. Suddenly there is a spate of writings predicting the end of Catholicism as we know it. All see a death and resurrection of sorts. Two stand out. Phyllis Tickle's challenging new book, "The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why," sees much turbulence and anxiety ahead as the Christian faith undergoes one of its periodic 500 year shakedowns; the Rev. Donald Cozzens's "In Search of the Emergent Church" believes a refashioned church will only come about after much has been scuttled.

What was imagined as a moment on the march, banners flying high, has turned into a car wreck.

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