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Catholics the New Episcopalians

Ken Briggs | Sep. 20, 2009 NCR Today

Some church traditions have a long history of spotlighting "trophy" converts as a means of gaining an edge. Perhaps the most publicized competition has been between Anglicans and Catholics. The defection of John Henry Newman from the Church of England to Rome remains the biggest headline in that tug-of-war.

The reasons why followers of one church jump to another are myriad. As the great sociologist/theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, social and economic factors are among those that have loomed large: in the "Social Sources of Denominationalism" he outlined the upwardly mobile process.

Niebuhr said that American church groups were arranged in a kind of hierarchy of class and prestige. If you began life as a poor person in a fundamentalist church, your education and spunk might lift to you a higher economic group which would, in turn, incline you toward a church that reflected your new status. And so on.

Episcopalians and Presbyterians (some United Church of Christ) were the aristocrats of this circumscribed world. Well-to-do people could feel at home in their tasteful churches being preached to by academically pedigreed clergy who put no demands other than financial on parishioners. Upwardly mobile Americans gravitated toward those churches; others reached their plateau as Methodists, Lutherans or similar middle class groups.

Perks counted. The liturgy had to be orderly and refined, the music at least marginaly professional, the setting pleasant and undisturbing. Most of all, the top rung had to be respectable.

Those requirements are still there, but the dynamics appear to have dramatically shifted. I would guess that Roman Catholics have become the new Episcopalians. Crossing over to Catholicism confers certain advantages to a particular kind of believer and now that Catholics occupy the top tier of U.S. income earners, socio-economic prestige need not be sacrificed in the process.

Despite the big losses the Catholic church in America has suffered (a third of those born Catholic have left says Pew), it has a cache that has drawn a number of well-known converts. To name a few: the late Robert Novak, Jeb Bush, Newt Gingrich, 400 or so Anglican priests, Paul Weyrich and Robert Bork. The list is overwhelmingly male (Laura Ingraham is among the rare ones) and thumpingly conservative.

Clearly the Catholic church has become a haven for opponents of women's ordination and homosexuality. Episcopalians are torn in the aftermath of acceptance of both and the losing side has a place to go. Furthermore, Catholicism taken on face value can present itself as the bearer of unchanging truth, unlike traditions that open their convictions to scrutiny. It's something claiming to be utterly reliable.

Also, though globalization has become a shopworn phrase, it indicates a very real awareness of world-wide connections. Joining the Catholic church can satisfy a longing to be ecclesiastically global. Along with that, it seems that some of those who take the leap into Catholicism are looking for validation of their identity as Christians. The "universal" tag may have been the missing element in their search for something bigger, if not

better, than the more parochial church environs in which they may have existed as Baptists or Disciples of Christ. A kind of feather in one's cap from their point of view. It may be an illusion fraught with misperceptions but it appeals, just as its secular counterpart does.

It isn't all passing trends, however. The attraction to Catholicism by any and all of the notables deserves respect as a deeply personal movement of the soul. Henry II's assertion that "Paris is worth a mass" reeks of the cynical side to looking for advantages in religious affiliation, but it certainly doesn't cover all bases. Maybe Henry got there for the wrong reasons, but being there may have led him in remarkable spiritual pathways.

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