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A new Catholic horizon

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THE FUTURE CHURCH: HOW TEN TRENDS ARE REVOLUTIONIZING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
By John L. Allen Jr.
Published by Doubleday, $28

Perceptive, evenhanded, thought-provoking, horizon-expanding, remarkably well informed--words like these popped into my head as a read John L. Allen Jr.?s new book, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*. I thought I detected in his introduction a note of apology for writing as ?a journalist, not a priest, theologian or academic.? His credentials, as *NCR* readers know, are just fine. If you had doubts, the book will dispel them.

To read an except from *The Future Church* by John L. Allen Jr. **click here** [1].

Join Allen in discussing his book on his blog **The Future Church** [2].

The title tantalizes by promising more than anybody can deliver. Allen has too much sense to try to deliver it. He provides no blueprint for the future, no church design. He does just the opposite.

His analysis of the trends makes two things clear. First, we are on the brink of changes that, taken together, will radically reshape the church. ?Revolutionize? is Allen?s word. Second, the trends will pursue their own course, interacting with one another and with culture at large in ways that make it impossible to say what the final results of the revolution will be. How radical a revolution? It?s anybody?s guess, I suppose. The trends present challenges whose novelty and magnitude make the heart skip a beat. They in their cumulative import -- I speak as a historian -- portend shifts in Catholic patterns without parallel in the past. Allen lays them out evenhandedly and, as he says, descriptively, not prescriptively. By that he means he does not present the trends as either good or bad for the church. He presents them simply as the way things are moving.

The trends are of course not unrelated to one another. ?World-Church,? not surprisingly the first Allen deals with, is closely related to ?The New Demography,? to ?Multipolarism,? and to ?Globalization.?

By midcentury, Nigeria, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo will be among the 10 largest Catholic nations in the world, displacing from the list Poland and Spain. But this newly world church, a result, in part, of the demographic shift, is affected by globalization. It shoves into prominence cultural values and priorities different from those of the North Atlantic world that still frame our Catholic sensibilities, which raises the multipolar issue. One trend tempers or intensifies another, as does globalization with affirmation of indigenous values and priorities.

?Evangelical Catholicism? and ?Pentecostalism? are also closely related, and they to some extent tie in to ?Islam.? These three together make the future look more conservative on sexual and gender issues. But then there is the ?Biotech Revolution,? which, along with other developments in the scientific world such as ?the expanding universe,? challenges fundamental principles of Catholic teaching as we have known them. Besides human cloning, embryonic stem cell research and related issues we often hear about, the biotech revolution drills deep into the foundations of religion itself when it thinks it?s discovered a God gene. In comparison, the ?Ecology? trend might seem tame, but, as Allen shows, it too overturns established patterns of thinking, behaving and theologizing.

Readers may be surprised to find ?Expanding Lay Roles? among the trends, which raises the question of how a trend makes it to the top 10. Allen developed six criteria: A trend must be global, have impact at the grass roots, involve official leadership, have potential to explain a variety of factors, contain predictive power and not be ideologically driven. These criteria allowed Allen to eliminate some usual suspects, such as the sexual abuse crisis, John Paul II and women. The chapter on ?Trends That Aren?t,? short though it is, will engage you as much as the others.

For the trends that are, Allen divides each of the 10 chapters into two sections. The first, ?What?s Happening,? does what it promises. It presents and analyzes information. These sections are, for me, the most satisfying and impressive in the book. Allen has done his homework. He propels the reader into a crash course about what?s happening not only in the church but in economics, diplomacy, global politics and similar matters. I?m not sure how experts in those fields will judge Allen?s analysis. All I can say is that I learned a lot and I think you will too.

The second section, ?What It Means,? speculates on consequences of the trends in descending order of certainty -- from near certain, to probable, to possible, to long shot. The subjunctive mood dominates this section. ?Could be? and ?might be? appear often, along with fellow travelers like ?maybe? and ?conceivably.? The demographic trends might seem solid, but such trends have reversed themselves in the past. A pandemic or two could do the same in the future.

The subjunctive diet can get tedious. It makes clear, however, that forces are at play out there in utterly unpredictable ways. They are truly big forces, with an erratic charge at their core. Jokers and wild cards abound in this game. Maybe the trends are not, after all, going to generate the ecclesial equivalent of the Big Bang, but they just might come close.

The book validated what I believe is the most lasting significance of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In its largest scope the council tried to make the church face the world as it is and then deal with it as it is. It tried to dispel nostalgia for the medieval ?ages of faith,? for the perfect world order that prevailed before the French Revolution, and for other historical illusions.

The church decided to face the facts of the ?modern world,? which included cultural and religious pluralism and all the conundrums that modern science thrust upon us regarding our origins, our survival, and our well-being.

Facing the facts is precisely what Allen is asking the church -- asking us -- to do.

The book also confirms a basic truth about the historical trajectory of the church: What happens outside the church is more important for it than what happens inside it. Church reforms such as the Investiture Controversy in the 11th century, the Council of Trent in the 16th, and Vatican II in the 20th were changes introduced into church life and practice by leaders in the church and made operative by them. Such changes, important though they were, can seem almost insignificant in comparison with the impact of things like Constantine?s recognition of the church in the fourth century or something as mundane in the 19th as the invention of the telephone.

The Future Church is not casual bedtime reading. Its message requires an alert mind, ready to digest information and grasp complexities. Allen believes, and I do too, that the impact of the trends, whatever that might concretely turn out to be, requires a new kind of courage on our part. It requires courage ?to think beyond the interests of one?s own Catholic tribe,? the courage to rise to a new Catholic horizon, which is also Catholic. Reading the book is itself a first step.

Jesuit Fr. John W. O?Malley, a church historian, is professor of theology at Georgetown University in Washington. His latest books are What Happened at Vatican II (Harvard) *and* A History of the Popes *(Sheed and Ward).*

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/15730
[2] http://ncronline.org/thefuturechurch