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# The horizontal dimension

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 10, 2009

John L. Allen Jr. (NCR photo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

*The following is an excerpt from John L. Allen Jr.?s* The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church. *Copyright 2009 by Doubleday Religion. Reprinted by Permission of Doubleday Religion, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.*

American Jesuit sociologist Fr. John Coleman has observed that despite its rich intellectual and human resources, Catholicism has played a curiously ?subaltern? role in most contemporary debates over globalization, with the lone exception perhaps coming with the Jubilee 2000 debt relief campaign. In trying to account for this mismatch between the church?s potential and its actual impact, Coleman cites a 1998 study of nongovernmental organizations, called Activists Beyond Borders by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, which argued that successful global actors today are generally loosely organized policy networks without multiple layers of command. Perhaps, Coleman has suggested, Catholicism?s hierarchical mode of organization lacks the flexibility needed to keep up with the intense pace at which issues mutate in a globalized world.

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To read John W. O'Malley's review of *The Future Church* by John L. Allen Jr. **click here** [1].

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

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In fairness, Catholicism does have a wide variety of successful horizontal actors in the form of religious orders, lay movements, and a variety of grass-roots coalitions. When these players join forces, they can produce striking results. One example came with debates in the United States over the fate of Terri Schiavo, the Florida woman in a persistent vegetative state who died in 2005 after life support was removed. Most of the Catholic energy in favor of keeping Schiavo alive came not from the church?s official leadership, but from a variety of pro-life groups and an ad hoc movement formed largely on the Internet. Whatever one makes of the position taken in that instance, it illustrates the capacity of an energized horizontal Catholicism to mobilize opinion and to get results. In this case, the movement didn?t prevent Schiavo?s death, but it did generate a national examination of

conscience around end-of-life issues that is still a work in progress.

Yet Coleman has a point that this horizontal dimension of Catholic activism remains underdeveloped, at least in comparison with the church?s vertical structures. Remedying that deficit is not primarily a task for the hierarchy; indeed, in many cases their most valuable contribution may be to stay out of the way. The construction of a more forceful, articulate horizontal sector in the church on the issues sketched above depends upon a growing share of lay Catholics, especially the vast majority who don?t belong to any formal movement or group, taking it upon themselves to translate their faith into action. Authentic horizontal Catholicism cannot be willed into existence by hierarchical fiat. It has to well up from the grass roots, reflecting a popular determination to get something done.

Waiting for the Vatican or the bishops to act, or blaming them for doing it the wrong way, won?t cut it. It?s the ultimate in clericalism to believe that everything in the church depends upon its clergy, or that nothing useful can be done until Rome turns over a new leaf. Such a position misreads both the theory and the practice of how change in the church works. When everything else is stripped away, the core responsibility of the hierarchy is to ensure that when Christ returns the faith will still be found upon the earth. By definition, in many ways, this is a conservative, cautious, defensive role. To also expect the hierarchy to be the primary ?change agent? in Catholicism, the chief source of its vision and new energy, is both unfair and unrealistic. To borrow a sports metaphor, it?s akin to expecting your defense to score all your points. When a bishop comes along who?s a visionary, one should receive it as a grace, but to expect it as the normal course of events is a prescription for heartburn.

In reality, change in Catholicism typically percolates at the grass roots and is then subject to a long period of theological and spiritual discernment at multiple levels, well before it is ever ratified and assimilated by the hierarchy. The church did not spawn mendicant orders in the 12th and 13th centuries, for example, because a pope decreed that it should be so, but because creative individuals such as St. Dominic and St. Francis saw an emerging need and responded to it. Similarly, the great burst of new teaching and missionary orders in the 19th century was the work of visionary Catholic women and men who seized the initiative, often struggling for most of their lives with recalcitrant superiors and bishops worried about where things might lead.

The plain reality is that if Catholicism is to generate the imagination required to meet the challenges of the trends we?ve surveyed, it is not principally a task for the hierarchy. It should be carried out in communion with the church?s leadership, of course, but it cannot depend upon them. To think otherwise is to succumb to a sort of ?purple ecclesiology,? in which the church is reduced to its bishops. Yes, bishops can sometimes abuse their authority, and they can artificially stifle creative energies. Their natural caution sometimes translates into rigidity or closure. Ultimately, however, time and the tides stop for no one, and good ideas will endure whatever their initial reception by the powers that be.

The real question, therefore, is not whether the bishops are up to the challenges of the 21st century. The question is whether the rest of us are.

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