

## Disaffected Catholics and 'bad Catholics'

Richard McBrien | Jan. 11, 2010 Essays in Theology

This column has called attention for a number of years (the first time in 1969) to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This ecumenical program, observed annually between Jan. 18 and Jan. 25, was originally proposed in 1908 by an Anglican (later Roman Catholic), Paul Wattson, as a "church unity octave."

Wattson's initial idea was broadened in 1935 by Abbé Paul Couturier to become a Universal Week of Prayer for Unity. Since 1966 the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been a joint project of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

The Week of Prayer provides an annual benchmark against which to measure ecumenical progress -- or lack thereof. Some observers have been describing the recent ecumenical movement as in a state of "drift." Relations remain warm between and among individual separated Christians, but there has been little forward movement between and among churches and ecclesial communities.

This year, however, the column turns its attention to a different kind of church-unity problem -- not to the state of ecumenical relations within the entire Body of Christ, but to the stresses and strains on unity that exist within individual churches, namely, the Catholic church and the Anglican communion, of which the Episcopal church in the United States is a significant part.

In late February 2008, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released a major survey that found that nearly a third of U.S. Catholics have left the Catholic church. Some have joined other churches, but most have simply slipped from active membership in the Catholic church to become part of a group once described as "lapsed Catholics."

This means that about 10 percent of all Americans today are former Catholics. It has been estimated that, if these ex-Catholics were to constitute a denomination unto themselves, they would be the second largest religious body in the United States -- after the Catholic church itself.

It should be noted in passing that the major losses suffered by the Catholic church in recent years have been largely offset by the new immigrant population, mostly from Latin America. In addition, over two percent of the population has joined the Catholic church within the same time-period.

But how has the pastoral leadership of the Catholic church responded to this acutely serious problem?

To the extent that the bishops have reacted at all, they seem to believe that disaffected Catholics are simply "bad Catholics," who cannot accept the morally demanding teachings of their church.

Some bishops convey the impression that the church's official teachings on contraception, divorce-and-remarriage, homosexuality, the ordination of women, and obligatory celibacy for priests are so clear and compelling that only a person of bad will could possibly disagree with them.

And yet there are many committed, well-educated, still-practicing Catholics, including many priests and religious women, who do disagree with these teachings, in whole or in part.

And how does the church's pastoral leadership respond to those with questions? In the case of priests, they are ruled ineligible for appointment as diocesan bishops. In the case of nuns, they are subjected to a "visitation" that is a thinly veiled investigation, and the leadership of 95 percent of their communities is subjected to a "doctrinal assessment."

The Pew study also found that young Catholics, ages 18-29, are much more likely than older Catholics to say that they are not affiliated with any particular religion. If these generational patterns persist, the survey warns, recent declines in the numbers of native-born Catholics and growth in the size of the unaffiliated population are likely to continue.

Whatever the case, the situation calls for bolder and more imaginative pastoral initiatives than have heretofore been proposed or tried.

Unless the Catholic church is the strongest and most committed participant in the ecumenical movement, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity can have only a limited effect.

As for Catholicism's Anglican sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ, their communion is currently rent with deep divisions over the issue of homosexuality, especially in the episcopate. It is the gravest pastoral problem on the Archbishop of Canterbury's plate.

Anglicanism has traditionally seen itself a bridge within the divided Body of Christ. But, again, if the Anglican communion is itself torn by internal division, how can it serve the full Body of Christ as an effective bridge between the Catholic church and the broad community of Protestant denominations?

Those committed to the restoration of Christian unity should be deeply concerned about these developments within Catholicism and Anglicanism.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an appropriate time to act upon these concerns.

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