

There is no vocation crisis

Jamie Manson | Feb. 11, 2010

The most recent statement to shame and blame young Catholics for the crisis in vocations comes courtesy of Cardinal Franc Rodé, the man overseeing the much-publicized investigation of U.S. women religious. According to the Catholic News Service's account of the speech, "Rodé said it was undoubtedly more difficult today for all religious orders to find young people who are willing to break away from the superficial contemporary culture and show a capacity for commitment and sacrifice."

Cardinal Rodé, like a majority of his counterparts in the clergy, would have us believe that young Catholics have contributed to the crisis of religious life by adopting a secularist mentality and embracing a culture of death.

Having spent seven years at a divinity school (three years as a student, four years as an administrator) and five years in non-profit work, Rodé's comments demonstrate for me, once again, how sadly out of touch Vatican officials are with the hearts and minds of many young adults.

Divinity schools and seminaries have no lack of applicants to the Master of Divinity degree programs. In fact, at Yale Divinity School, Harvard Divinity School, and Union Theological Seminary in New York, Roman Catholic students represent the second largest denomination on campus. In my time at Yale, I met Protestant students who admired the way in which the church's dynamic interplay of its sacramental life and social justice doctrine created schools, hospitals, retreat centers, and relief missions that have upheld a critical fabric of society. But the church's failure to turn its compassion and justice inward -- especially toward women and LGBT people -- forced these seminarians to turn away from committing to Catholicism.

And yet, not once have I heard a member of the Catholic clergy admit any accountability for the vocation crisis. Instead, they lament, as Cardinal Rodé did, that "the dominant culture, which is a culture of death, of violence and of abuse," has overcome newer generations.

In order to understand why young people are turning away from religious life, Cardinal Rodé and his associates would do well to consider the extent to which the Roman Catholic institution has contributed to such a culture.

For nearly a decade, young Catholics have been formed with thoughts and images of the church's grim history of sexual abuse cover-ups, a past that seems to stretch back more than 50 years. It took seven years before the pope, with a mere few sentences and a secret meeting with pre-selected victims, addressed the crisis.

Newer generations of Catholics grew up in a church where their divorced parents were denied Communion, they or their sisters were barred from serving at the altar, and their gay uncles and lesbian aunts were called an "abomination."

Many young Catholics were raised during the height of the AIDS crisis in our country, and they have learned about the pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. The disease has killed over 25 million people since 1981 and orphaned more than 14 million children in Africa. The institutional church has largely remained silent about the

crisis, and refused to consider distributing life-saving condoms to poor countries that have been devastated by HIV and AIDS.

This is the church in which young adult Catholics have grown up. It is the church that has told them that if they are women they are not allowed to pursue ordained ministry; if they are openly gay or desire the possibility of marriage and children, they are not welcome to religious life. And, yet, young adults are supposed to feel guilty for not wanting to make a vow of obedience to the institution and its superiors. Church leaders might be shocked to learn that by fleeing the church, some young people feel that they are fleeing abuse and spiritual violence.

It would be hard to measure the loss to society that is created by the decline in vocations to religious life. When I served at a Catholic parish in Greenwich Village, I had the honor of working side by side with several of the Sisters of Charity who cared for, fed and dressed the wounds of AIDS patients at St. Vincent's Hospital in the 1980s. They embraced this ministry at a time when everyone else was afraid to breathe the same air as these individuals. I know the impact that these women had and still have, and I know that their work was made possible by their devotion to religious life and Jesus' gospel message of radical inclusion and service.

I also know of countless young adults who are doing similar work with equal levels of commitment, passion, and sacrifice by laboring in homeless and domestic violence shelters, hospitals and hospices, group homes and addiction recovery centers. They are working abroad in war-torn squalor, and locally in rundown, inner-city basements. They are empowering poor mothers, educating children, aiding undocumented immigrants, planting rooftop gardens in the projects, and feeding the hungry in pantries, soup kitchens, and nursing homes.

So many young people are honoring the dignity of human life, fighting for justice, and sacrificing to serve the margins of society. By doing this they are, whether consciously or unconsciously, consecrating their lives to the work of the gospel. Most young people probably do not realize that they are doing the work mandated by Jesus. Sadly their notion of Jesus and Christianity is too often one of fundamentalism, exclusion, and judgment. They would be much more likely to know where the church stands vis à vis their sexual practices than they would understand that they were doing the traditional work of the church.

This is tragic, since newer generations would benefit from learning from those who have lived in religious life for decades. Sisters and brothers could teach new generations about the importance of meditations and retreats for fostering strength and endurance, and they could guide them on the importance of community to uphold and support them.

But newer generations do not go where they and their loved ones are not wanted. Since they were not formed in the church in the ways of previous generations, they do not feel compelled to give their lives to a church that has created so much harm. Instead, they are committing themselves to organizations that welcome their gifts and their service, regardless of their sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or marital status.

Perhaps the greatest sorrow in the church's convictions regarding the decline in vocations is its implications for the power and presence of God. Our God who is Love, Justice, Understanding, Mercy, Peace, and Hope is calling young people as loudly and clearly as ever. And young people are answering -- perhaps in greater numbers than ever.

There is no vocation crisis. To suggest that there is would be to suggest that God's calling is not powerful enough to permeate a culture purportedly awash in vapidty, violence, and darkness. The serious and sacrificial work of so many young people, against increasingly tougher odds, brings this world greater light, grace, and hope. It is sad to think that they were raised in a church that refuses to see them for who they truly are and to take the courageous risk of meeting them where they are.

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