

## The Domino Effect

Ken Briggs | May. 5, 2010 NCR Today

When the Archbishop of Canterbury declared on Good Friday that the Irish hierarchy's admitted mishandling of the child sex abuse scandal had stripped that nation's Catholicism of "all credibility," he might have been talking about the side effects his own Anglicans might suffer.

All roads may not lead to Rome, but most of the media do when it comes to defining Christianity to the world. For better or worse, television has further concentrated this gaze. The center of the Roman Catholic church is, so far as most media are concerned, the place where real Christianity is rooted. All other parties to that tradition are increasingly melded in the public mind.

The emergence of the ecumenical movement in the 1960s strengthened that perception. Though Protestants had initiated that movement earlier in the century, the Second Vatican Council put it on page one and the pope became its sometimes reluctant band leader.

Ecumenism slowed to a crawl under John Paul II and now Benedict XVI who signaled a resurgence of "one true" Catholicism, but the legacy is of the photogenic Vatican as the determiner of Christianity's future. Because of that development and the increasing power of media to define universal imagery, the pope has become the face of Christianity moreso than at any time since the Protestant Reformation.

Therefore, when the pope and his Vatican cabinet run into trouble, a much broader array of churches feel the pain. When the pope's credibility takes a hit, both Protestant and Orthodox authority incurs skepticism.

At one time, many Protestants might have taken comfort in the pope's troubles, but no longer. The internecine warfare between the two major branches of the Western church no longer exists to any significant extent.

What has replaced it is a growing challenge to Christianity itself in Europe and America in particular. In the global competition for souls, the ability of the churches to hold its own against other religions and secular atheism has gained force in recent decade. Organized Christianity is, by and large, in retreat and in some places on the skids. Even the much ballyhooed evangelical Protestant gains have slowed and in some cases stagnated.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has been facing down additional turmoil in his own communion as the result of the severe split over the ordination of gays into the priesthood and acceptance into the hierarchy. Last fall, the pope made the situation worse for him by inviting the disgruntled Anglicans to come home to daddy. The Church of England, already weak, lost further ground.

The fact that world Christianity has become more of a blurry whole without fine theological or ecclesiological distinctions by a global communication network means that what happens in the Irish Catholic church has an impact on the Church of Ireland. While the churches aren't anywhere near a common witness to Christianity, they are fashioned by media to look that way even against their will. One gets tarnished, all get tarnished, broadly speaking. When the pope, as the media's appointed head of Christianity, stumbles, all stumble to some degree.

No wonder, then, that the archbishop reacted so quickly and sharply to the tragedy in the Irish church. It's reputation, like it or not, either brightens or sullies his own church's in ways too subtle to measure as Christianity faces perhaps the greatest test of credility and trust in its history.

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