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A challenge to old progressives

Jamie Manson | May. 6, 2010

Last Saturday, I attended an event that has undoubtedly happened hundreds of thousands of times on Staten Island, that little known borough of New York City. An Italian guy and an Irish girl got married. It was the first marriage for both of them.

But something was different. The wedding ceremony took place in a catering hall. And the officiant was the cousin of the groom. He had been ordained by an internet-based church just a few weeks earlier.

Though the bride and groom were both baptized and raised Catholic, they were not at all interested in having their ceremony in a church.

A week earlier, I was at a gathering that included several young Catholic women with graduate degrees in theology from ivy-league divinity schools. The conversation eventually wended its way to the grim topic of ?where are you going to church these days?? Most of the women went to several different parishes based on which one got them the least frustrated or bored. None of them could find a single parish that they could call home.

These women, all of them talented, highly intelligent theologians, wanted to go to church but couldn?t find one where they were being fed in mind and heart.

In his April 30 online column, ?American Catholic Demographics and the Future of Ministry [1],? John Allen projects that the next generation of clergy and lay leadership in the Catholic church will emerge from an ?inner core of practicing and faithful young Catholics.? Allen writes, ?these younger Catholics are attracted to traditional spiritual practices such as Eucharistic adoration and Marian piety; they have a generally positive attitude towards authority, especially the papacy; and they?re less inclined to be critical of church teaching.? Their devotion to the Church, says Allen, is a response to their coming of age in a ?secular, rootless world.?

I believe Allen?s assessment is on target. My concern is that this inner core of faithful young people will be a very small, insular group. The Catholic church in the West will begin to shrink into a sect of strictly observant believers.

That?s all well and good for them. But what happens to the other baptized Catholics whose faith isn?t nourished by centuries-old devotions, the Latin Mass, and absolute subservience to an all male, celibate hierarchy and clergy?

Where will they find their spiritual home? Where will they find community in a time when face-to-face socialization is quickly disappearing? Where will they find guidance that will help them make meaning during times of sorrow and loss? Where will their values and ethics be challenged and molded so that they can find resources to help them make their marriages work and raise their children? Will they, too, like the other 30 million baptized Catholics in this country who do not attend church, be relegated to the pop spirituality, wellness seminars, life coaching, and new age therapeutics touted on "Oprah"?

Unlike the generations of progressive Catholics who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, young Catholics are not willing to fight for the soul of the church. The church has lost its influence over the consciences of new generations. Our imaginations were not formed by its rituals and our morality was not created by its figures of authority. We were not raised by a church that held absolute authority over the state of our souls -- both in this life and the next.

As a result, many of the symbols of the Catholic church, most especially the priesthood, the parish, and the Mass, have lost their power for many young Catholics. Though these symbols are dying out, the need for the meaning, ethical guidance, and spiritual development embodied in the symbols is stronger than ever.

One of my closest friends has been teaching a course in the theology of marriage for more than twenty years at a Jesuit university. From his conversations with students, it is very clear that the church no longer has influence over the consciences and spiritual lives of most of his students. However, the theology of marriage course continues to be among the most popular and sought out in the university. The reason is obvious. The students have few resources to turn to that will help them navigate through the treacherous land of intimate relationships and the increasingly murky world of life commitment.

If these young adults have children, perhaps they will see a need for church community, for a sense of meaning, for a system of values and beliefs with which to raise their children. But there is a good chance that they will not think to seek this from the Church, which has lost much of its moral authority with young Catholics.

Call me crazy, but I don?t think this is all bad. By being free of the trappings of the institutionalized church, younger generations have a real and unprecedented potential to realize the kind of church that Jesus? earliest disciples brought to life.

New generations have an extraordinary commitment to social service and to creating a just society, whether through the field of social work, non-profit development, green jobs, or documentary filmmaking. In many ways, they are already doing the work of the church. But what is lacking is a real sense of how to build and sustain community, which is essential to their spiritual health and support.

This, I believe, is where older progressive Catholics can be an extraordinary resource. These reformers spend a lot of time and energy worrying, analyzing, writing about, and arguing with the institutional church. I believe they would do well to take some of the energy behind their righteous anger, and engage those who are struggling to find meaning and spiritual development in a rootless world. This might be a better -- and certainly more life-giving -- use of their time than simply fighting a self-destructive institution.

Together we need to explore the ways in which we are already church, and to enhance the opportunities to become more fully church. We need to discover what sacred experiences we are hungering for and what brings us the more abundant life that Jesus taught us to seek. The more the institutional church starves us, the greater the call should be for us to feed one another by breaking bread together -- literally and symbolically.

Younger generations need this support to help them find roots. Older generations need strength and new life from the roots that they planted decades ago. If we begin to think creatively outside of the institutional church and imagine smaller, more intimate ways of sharing community, we all might begin to realize the church as it was in its beginnings.

[Jamie Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. A writer based in New York, she is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine *Reflections*. As a lay minister she has worked extensively with New York City's homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the

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