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Steinfels on Church Decline

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 19, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Commonweal has a very important article [1]up by Peter Steinfels about the increasingly large number of Catholics who are leaving the Church. It makes for sober, and very thoughtful, reading.

I want to comment on two items Steinfels mentions. He writes, "Catholics becoming Protestants were less apt to stress unhappiness about specific teachings and more likely to pinpoint failures to meet their spiritual needs, frequently stating a general appreciation of their new affiliation and its manner of worship." Here, it seems to me, is the core problem. I do not want to see our churches adopt the banal, but popular, liturgical style of the megachurches. But, it would be nice to go to Mass confident that you will hear a good sermon, sing beautiful music, and experience a liturgy that is not thrown together. A priest sees more of his flock at Sunday Mass then at any other time, and much more attention needs to be paid to the liturgy than is currently done in far too many parishes. I am lucky, because I attend two churches both of which have evocative liturgies and pastors who preach well. But, if the car is broken, I have three churches I can walk to but at each of them, the liturgies leave me wondering why I came.

Secondly, Steinfels writes about the influx of Latinos. I agree with him that their presence is, in a way, saving the Church in the United States. But, I think the influx of Latinos may do even more than Steinfels suggests. We tend to think of assimilation as a one way street, but it isn't. Yes, Latinos will adopt American ways, but they will also change American ways. Their religious sensibilities are more tied to their families than to the parish, and they express their religion culturally in ways most Anglo Catholics never learned. It is not just that they are bringing greater numbers, it is that they are bringing a different understanding of what it means to be Catholic and they are doing so at a time when technological advances allow them to hold on to their culture in ways previous immigrants could not, from Univision to the internet. There was a great billboard for Univision that read "Unision - it's as American as flan!" I hope that something like that will happen to the Catholic Church in the U.S. also, that processions on feast days will be seen to be important manifestations of the faith, that the "little Church" which is the family - and the extended family, not the nuclear one - will be restored to its central role in the culture, and that some of the forgiveness and empathy that are hallmarks of Latin culture will soften American culture.

Steinfels is always a thoughtful commentator, but I thought this essay was truly one of his best. It is worth taking the time to read.

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Links:
[1] http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/further-adrift