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The ticking bomb of lay involvement

Joan Chittister | Nov. 18, 2010 From Where I Stand

Ticking time bombs are among the world?s most dangerous weapons. Most of them are too small to see at first glance. Most of them are easy to make. You can plant a number of them at one time. They can do a great deal of damage, however small.

We discovered that to our peril when convoy after convoy in Iraq was ambushed and destroyed, not by a well groomed, well-trained army with weapon systems as big as ours but by collections of nails in wired tin cans planted by children or detonated by lone insurgents. We spent years being frustrated in the fields of Cambodia, too, unable to see the landmines in front of us, unable to neutralize them before they exploded

No doubt about it: small things can create huge craters in a society.

Now we are dealing with another kind of time bomb. This one?s in the church. Few noticed when this one was planted either. Few people saw the power in it.

In the revised Code of Canon Law that followed Vatican II, someone planted what, at that time, read like a welcome invitation -- an openness to participation by the laity in the organizational development of the church. Little was made of the statement and little expected to come from it.

Canon 212 gave laity ?the right and the responsibility? to make known to their pastors their needs. It was a bell waiting to be rung. In fact the bell went off in my mail a couple of weeks ago.

As I understand the situation, the local pastor of a parish in Santa Fe, N.M., gave an enthusiastic homily on the importance to the church of a recent ordination in the diocese. Then he ended his remarks by reporting to the congregation his own advice to the newly-ordained.

?I told him to remember that his duty was to serve God,? the pastor said, ?not the people.?

That?s when Canon 212 exploded in the head and heart of Robert and Lynn Lawton Jones. They went home and wrote a letter to the pastor in which they defined their own top 10 suggestions for newly-ordained priests.

I thought it might be interesting for the rest of the church if I simply listed them here in bold with what I think might be a popular interpretation of the needs they are meant to address in normal type:

These longtime faithful parishioners suggest that a new priest:

1. **Reread annually a summary of the second Vatican Council reforms.**
   What they need apparently is someone who will implement the Council, not resist it.
2. **Commit yourself to interfaith bridge building.**
   These Catholics who long ago struggled through the Catholic-Protestant divide have no desire to see us

substitute another one for it in this new century. Living in a world that is more cosmopolitan than ethnic, they want the church to reach out to their neighbors who are now Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim.

3. **Be open to a changing position of the church on gays and women.**
   The kind of openness that Jesus showed to women and to those outside the social norms of Judaism is a hallmark of the Christian life and must be modeled by the church if the church itself is to be authentic.
4. **Learn more in the first four years of your priesthood than you did in the recent [seminary trainings].**
   The message is clear: the parish has as much to teach a new priest as the seminary ever did.
5. **Prepare your homilies with one hand on the Bible and the other on (with) the daily newspaper.**
   The church does not exist in a world of its own. The Gospel must be good news to the church in every age.
6. **Work with people rather than imposing a top-down strategy.**
   The church may not be a democracy, but it was never meant to be a monarchy either. Listening to the needs of the laity can only give new energy to the church.
7. **Respect the role of the laity in an evolving Church.**
   The church does not belong to the clergy. It belongs to all of us together. The priest is meant to be a shepherd, a brother, a leader -- not a potentate. The laity are meant to take their responsibility for the community, as well, and must be seen as equals in the ministry, not servants.
8. **Build upon personal spirituality by a growing concern for social justice.**
   To live the gospel we must do more than meditate on it; we must practice it.
9. **Store your seminary notes in an inaccessible place.**
   Remember that parish life is about more than theory, theology, and ?the rules.? Like Jesus, be among us, listen to us, enable us all to go on together.
10. **Remember that an unquestioning ?company man? in all professions, even the priesthood, sacrifices creative energy.**
    There are times when the needs of people transcend any particular rule. Let your Archbishop know what?s really going on in the church -- whether he wants to know about it or not -- so we can all grow together. And, whatever you do, think carefully about who you are so you can understand who the people are. (Matt 23: 4-12)

Seminarians: attention.

The list is not only an impressive one but it is a realistic one. In fact, I realized as I read it that it describes a great number of the great priests among us who have held the church together this last 50 years -- in a time of major transition -- by both enabling its growth and revering its traditions in new and creative ways. It says clearly to the newly-ordained: ?We don?t need to have you go back; we need to have you go on.?

It?s hard to know whether or not today?s seminarians are listening to those needs but, one thing is for sure, Canon 212 is working. Correction: ticking.

It?s pretty clear that a lot of this kind of discussion goes on. The laity are no longer passive observers of church rules, church liturgy, or church administration. They see themselves as carriers of the faith as well as consumers of the faith. They know that baptism is every bit as important as ordination.

The number of lay people who, after Vatican II and at their own expense, got degrees in theology, liturgy, Scripture and canon law -- and wrote letters like this one to their pastors -- are clear evidence of their commitment to the church.

They are not signs of arrogance. Or rebellion. Or infidelity. They are signs of deep-down, total and life-long commitment.

From where I stand, it seems, in the light of material like this, that we may need some new conversations together. These ideas deserve to be shared and aired and discussed. After all, if the church ignores it, the laity, I?m sure, will not.

After all, Canon 212 is theirs and they, it appears, are taking it seriously. Tick, tick, tick...

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