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Shattered expectations of institutional change bring true vision of God

Jamie Manson | Dec. 20, 2010 Grace on the Margins

As life-giving as it is for me to attend meetings with progressive Catholics who are committed to inviting this institutional church into greater integrity and inclusion, I always come away from these gatherings with a slight heaviness in my heart.

What weighs on me, I believe, is the palpable hurt in this group of faithful people whose expectations have been betrayed. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s it was not unreasonable for Catholics to believe that major reforms were beginning to unfold.

So often traditional Catholics make progressive Catholics feel like they are asking the impossible, or they are imposing their own secular needs on a church that is unchangeable.

In the face of these criticisms, it helps to remember that the movement to bring a spirit of change and open-mindedness to the Catholic Church was initiated by the hierarchy. It was church authorities that sought the reforms that would allow them to understand more fully the lives of the people they were serving.

The first Call to Action conference was actually called by bishops to engage lay people in dialogue through an innovative consulting process. The bishops recognized that a church that ventures to speak about justice must first be just in the eyes of those it serves. The phrase ?Call to Action? was taken from Pope Paul VI?s conviction that the laity receives the primary call to action to create a more just world.

More than 100 bishops attended the first Call to Action meeting in Detroit in 1976, which hosted three days of discussion and debate among 1,340 voting delegates and 1,500 observers. The assembly recommended that the church become a prophetic force in decrying racism, sexism, and poverty.

In the wake of such progress many Catholics felt hopeful that reforms like the ordination of married men and of women were on the horizon.

Given these auspicious beginnings, it is no wonder that there is unrest and sorrow among the lay people who worked with bishops to achieve these goals. They have stood by powerlessly, watching the hierarchy spend three decades gradually breaking their own promises. Their expectations have been shattered.

During the third week of Advent, we heard another account of disappointed expectations.

The Gospel recounts the stunning news that Jesus had failed to meet John the Baptist?s expectations about the Messiah. Even after Jesus has healed multitudes of blind, deaf, paralyzed, and possessed people, John -- who is in prison at this point -- sends an emissary to ask Jesus whether he was really the Messiah. The question is almost comical: ?Are you the one, or should we wait for another??

John was expecting the Messiah to be a fiery judge, filled with anger and indignation at those whose lives are not upright in the eyes of God. This Jesus, however, reserved his power not for judgment, but to heal the

afflicted and give good news to the poor. John was expecting a didactic, imposing figure. Instead he got a marginal and marginalized visionary.

Jesus invites John to see a different face of God: the God who is at one with the weak, the impoverished, and those living on the edge of society.

Perhaps it?s because only the vulnerable are willing to make themselves vulnerable to the power of God. Perhaps God likes to go to the places where God is most welcome.

Jesus shows John that those places of powerlessness and brokenness can also be places of strength and holiness. They are the places where God has chosen to dwell. John?s disappointed expectations turn out to be good news for all of us.

What else could we expect of a God who comes into the world as an imperiled infant, born in a barn -- and exits the world as a humiliated, common criminal?

Advent may be an occasion for us to reflect on the ways in which our own unfulfilled expectations might also be good news.

Yes, it is painful to be alienated by the institutional church, and the hierarchy?s disempowering actions are spirit-breaking. But in these fragments of our shattered expectations we may find an opportunity to see God in the faces of the rejected believers, of the powerless ministers, of the isolated prophets.

Being free of the trappings of church authority has a way of illuminating the path of integrity, of true wholeness. Working on the margins of religious institutions can allow us insight into where God is fully alive. There is so much holiness brimming like living water on the margins of the parched desert of the institutional church.

In the Gospel, Jesus asked those in the desert what they were expecting to see. It is a question that we should ask ourselves about our own expectations.

We know that it is imperative that we continue the work of calling church leaders to accountability for the harm they have created and the promises they have broken. But we must continually ask ourselves how the church we are hoping for can be realized in such a structure of power.

What is this church we are expecting to see? What is it that keeps us fighting for our vision?

Is it a desire to have a place at the center of religious authority? Is it to claim a seat on the bench of ecclesial judges? Or is it a longing to develop a church that immerses itself, fearlessly, into those ailing, broken, and abandoned places in our lives and our world?

Advent is a season of joyful expectation, but it is also a season that reminds us that
God reaches God?s fullness of life on the margins.

Even if the hierarchy does one day decide to renew its Vatican II promises, we must not let our expectations cloud our vision of the God who has continually emerged from the unexpected places.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

Editor's Note: Jamie Manson has been writing a Web column for *NCR* since November 2008 when she premiered as one of our "Young Voices" columnists. Last month, *NCR* invited and Manson agreed to become a weekly columnist under her own title. "Grace on the Margins" is the result. It will appear here every Monday.

Why is this column titled Grace on the Margins? Read Manson's inaugural column: **The grace of living on the margins** [1].

We can send you an e-mail alert every time Jamie Manson?s column, "Grace on the Margins", is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [2]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

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