

Set-decorator Catholicism: The common traits of set-decorators

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jul. 7, 2011 | Bulletins from the Human Side

Part Two of Two

The first common characteristic of set-decorators is their affinity for surfaces. Professing commitment to the depths of the faith, they are obsessed with rustling cassocks, billowing capes, sounding bells and bows, the stuff, in short, with which they can redecorate the set of hierarchical Catholicism. If they build it, these clerics believe, the people will come.

Secondly, they share a bristling confidence that they are the defenders of the faith out to rid the church of Vatican II heresies, such as the laity's participation in the administration and ministry of the church. Thirdly, they exhibit a kind of pride of the regiment in perceiving themselves as the last of the just and the first of a new generation of true believers whose zeal for their Father's House earns them places of honor in a restored 1920's ecclesiastical kingdom.

Fourthly, they are highly judgmental of any persons who dare to disagree with them and intolerant of anyone who seems curious about or bold enough to question their decisions. They characteristically spend money as they wish, and, disbanding or ignoring parish councils, feel no need for the advice or consent of their parishioners, often expensively refurbishing their own offices and making changes in Church décor to suit their pre-Vatican II mentalities.

Fifthly, they rationalize their autocratic commands as theologically justified when many times their claims about theology or even Church law are misstated or exaggerated. Removing symbolic Stations of the Cross, one such cleric spuriously claimed that they violated Canon Law. In replacing a modern carved crucifix of Jesus resurrected with one gory enough to please Mel Gibson, this pastor joined himself to the set-decorators who hold that Catholicism flows from Jesus' crucifixion rather than his resurrection.

Next, although one must sympathize with such set-decorators, they seem uncomfortable with intimacy in general and with closeness with women in particular. Women, as the fresh-from-Rome priest explained on Holy Thursday, stand at the lowest and least level of God's hierarchical structure of the human species. First priests, then men-in-general, and finally woman, sorry, that's the way it is. "Priests," he explained, "have different souls than lay people."

This presumption of their ontological superiority explains why set-decorators treat their people as if they were children to be set right rather than as theologically informed adults to be nourished in their understanding of their faith. God wills their superiority over mere lay people, as they see it, so that Father, Monsignor, or Bishop always knows best and no deviation from their judgments is allowed.

Set-decorators therefore expect lay people to relate upwards to them from their inferior position in the hierarchical display. Like turtles, these clergy peer out from the hardened carapace of clericalism, pulling back inside whenever they pick up the scent of life-altering intimacy. The dark chill clerical shell shields them from intimacy's inevitable challenge to change themselves. They feel threatened by and retreat from any relationship

they cannot control.

Celibacy therefore serves them well because it seemingly -- but only seemingly -- provides a noble rationalization for their keeping laypeople at a safe distance through their defensive controlling style. Celibate clericalism is very different from the celibacy expressed in the lives of the healthy majority of priests who are at ease in equal relationships with others.

Lastly, sharing a sense of entitlement to the rewards of the higher clerical state, these priests live in the gated community of Hierarchical Heights and long to climb Mount Episcopus. Clericalism is a kind of scarlet fever marked by longings for robes trimmed with that color, although purple will do. There is no known cure for this infection whose prime symptoms include a restless anticipation that higher ecclesiastical honors may come in the morning mail.

Set-decorators cannot follow the Gospel injunction to be "single-eyed" because they keep one eye on what they are doing and the other on how their actions are received by their bishop. Many manifest the characteristics of the *puer aeternus*, the psychologically under-developed male who carries the romantic self-centeredness of this adjustment into his adult life. Set-decoration is to them what Fantasy Football is to the eternal boys in the culture at large, a safe Peter Pan-like excursion that insulates them every day's unforgiving demands.

These priests do not relate easily to parishioners who have put away the things of childhood to live an adult faith. These fastidious new clerics prefer unquestioning loyalists who apparently like being treated as if they were children. Confirmed clerics peer out their doll house windows at a world they judge to be as sinful as it is secular.

They prefer the calm of their carefully constructed set on which they play with people, as children do with toy soldiers, designing missions and destinies for each of them and putting them back in their box when they tire of them. For the classic set-decorator, the people are time consuming impediments and distractions from their main interest, getting ahead in the church.

Blowin' in the Wind

You don't have to be a weatherman to know that set-decoration has invaded the atmosphere of the church. Has the pressing need for priests made Church leaders more willing to accept candidates who are more comfortable in the past than they are in the future? Will priests with an appetite for exercising power over their people be included among those considered for leadership positions in the future?

Where does the capacity for making healthy relationships rank in the criteria for candidates for ministry in the Church? And with the numbers of Catholics steadily increasing, do the leaders of Catholicism imagine that they will be content with the scenarios of set-decoration as a substitute for healthy sacramental pastoral care?

Does the classic set-decorator's flight into the past with its side-effect symptoms of the virtual sex abuse of Catholics suggest the urgency of thoroughly assessing the ministerial needs and resources of the Catholic Church in America?

America's Catholic leaders seem to accept the autocrats now sitting at many rectory breakfast tables in the name of refurbishing their own authority. They understand, perhaps in a glass darkly, the damage they suffered by managing the problem of sex abuse in the same way that other institutions did in that long era in which the culture protected the Professional while ignoring the damage to or the rights of the Victim. Victims were only identified and their rights acknowledged in relatively recent times.

That approach, always recommended by public relations advisers, lawyers, and insurers, failed the bishops in a

long shielded sex abuse crisis among priests that became public in the era of heightened awareness of the suffering and loss of Victims. The bishops then appeared to be what they are not -- heartless in their readiness to reassign priest predators after hospital or clinic treatment supposedly cleared them for action in parishes uninformed of their past behavior.

Most of the bishops now anxious to restore their credibility would be surprised, not to say amazed, to learn that they are ordaining and placing their hopes in some men who are more subtle than but nonetheless psychological twins to the priests whose incomplete personal growth lay coiled at the heart of the sex abuse scandal.

When popes or prelates speak of a remnant Church, one that is much smaller and yet uniform in its profession of faith, they are rationalizing the kind of exclusive cohort of passive believers for whom a significant subset of the clergy are decorating the set of contemporary Catholicism. Its emergence may give bishops an illusory sense of restoring their authority but it is actually widening the gap between them and thousands of theologically informed Catholics who will not accept being demeaned and humiliated as the price of their worshipping in parishes administered by set-decorators.

The healthy, theologically sophisticated Catholics who belong to such movements as the Voice of the Faithful or Future Church, love the Church, want to support good priests, and are not leading a revolution against their bishops whose authority they respect and with whom they seek to collaborate in building the 21st century Church.

The bishops and many priests, however, are hesitant to meet with members of such groups and in various ways, such as denying them meeting room on Catholic property, indicate their apparent fear that its members are heretics or worse. The leadership of the official Church appears to be less comfortable relating to adult lay Catholics than they are to immature members of the clergy.

Nobody can talk bishops into a better collegial relationship with adult Catholics and nobody can talk them out of a lesser hierarchical relationship with adolescent clergy. The latter are giving artificial respiration to an authoritarian, exclusive Church that looms like a Flying Dutchman, under full sail but empty, on the horizon. Mature Catholics are willing to be born again but they are not ready to be abused as children again.

While growth in Catholicism over the next decade will be a function of increased Hispanic members, recent studies have documented an ongoing drift of thousands of traditionally American Catholics away from abuse by the set-decorator class of the clergy.

Whether these Catholics leave in sorrow or in anger they are ready to find other churches in which to worship or to begin to develop liturgies of their own, celebrations offered by a person that they choose to preside over a Eucharist they endorse. Many Catholics who never thought that they would go along with such a departure from the practiced routine of the Church now contemplate it as preferable to the demeaning atmosphere generated by the set-decorating class.

We might sum up the problem and its cure in this way: Church officials might well listen more to the Catholics they currently don't trust and trust less the clergy to whom they currently listen.

The emergence of the set-decorating class of the clergy provides an opportunity for the bishops to convene the plenary council they scratched from their agenda a few years ago. In such a gathering they would hear the voices of the healthy majority of Catholics on whom the future of the Church depends. A meeting held in the sunlight and fresh air of the transparency the bishops claim as an ideal would give them the chance, on their own, to observe the dangerous immaturity of a subset of their currently active priests.

The information that would be shared at such a meeting would dispel the notion of a vocational shortage. There

may be a shortfall of clerics but the thousands of lay people who have been trained in and are active in parish ministry suggest that there is no shortage of men and women who feel called to serve the Church.

It is from the ranks of these healthy people that, in the tradition of St. Augustine, the candidates for the future priesthood should be selected by the members of each parish. That will eliminate that dependence on a vague internal voice bidding someone to enter the seminary. These voices can arise from uncertain sources and, as with set-decorators, may be expressions of a need to dominate rather than a readiness to serve others. The candidates chosen by the people can then be presented to the bishop who is the true author of the call, or vocation, to ordination.

The bishops need not wait to initiate moves that would strengthen their own authority and meet the need for healthy sacramental ministers at the same time. Canon lawyers do not believe that there is any impediment to ordaining permanent deacons to the priesthood.

These men are known quantities, most of them are married with families and all have theological training and experience. The bishops can, with such a move, guarantee the availability of the sacraments, allay the fears of many Catholics that the Church will not be there to serve future generations, and eliminate the virtual sex abuse committed by the set-decorator clergy who are not even aware of how they are dominated by ill-understood needs to pull themselves up by putting others down.

No permission from the Holy See is necessary to carry out this program that would strengthen the Church, relieve the tension between bishops and their people, and eliminate the dynamics responsible for the real and the virtual sex abuse crisis. The bishops can be confident that they serve the Church and the Pope well if they cast a vote for the health and holiness of the Church if they stop trusting the set-decorating clergy they now listen to and start listening to the good Catholics that they presently do not trust.

Back to Chicago, November 1986

The actors and other members of the production team immediately break out of the make-believe to head for the airport to get home for the holiday ahead. The vintage automobiles are loaded onto car haulers, the newspaper bundles are scooped up and workers in overalls strike the set like bored children ordered to pick up their toys, collecting the lamps and chairs, folding up the putting green and packing them for storage. The stunning remembrance of times past created for The Untouchables dissolves as mists and mirages do in the rising sun. Ask Marcel Proust; he can tell you that no matter how artfully you regain the past you cannot really live there?

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