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Guilt shortage dooms reform of the reform

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Aug. 4, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

The Reformers of the Reform resemble those who restore and sell antique cars. They labor strenuously to polish up once sleek models out of the '20s and flog them confidently as the next big thing in Catholic life.

Their sparkling showroom is modeled on St. Peter's, their sales people speak Latin, and, instead of cash, they offer plenary indulgences as incentives. They hand out a stilted language manual that promises the people they want to convert into pilgrims that they can ride happily again on the two-lane roads of pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

There is only one thing missing: the fuel of neurotic guilt that these vehicles desperately need in order to wheeze their way back to that church whose imagined glories depended on making people feel bad even about being good.

The so-called Reform of the Reform will sputter out precisely because it cannot drill in the Arctic, in the Gulf, or in people's backyards for the massive amounts of inappropriate guilt that were pumped into the lives of Catholics to keep them in their pews and in their places in the Father-is-always-right era into which these deluded pied pipers of reform are determined to lead us.

Catholicism can rightly claim that it has always made room for, forgiven and offered comfort to sinners. The cultural evocation of Catholicism that gleams in the eyes of Reformers of the Reform is, however, a distortion of the church's humane and understanding pilgrimage with its people.

These zealots do not understand the profound pastoral majesty of a Servant Church whose energy source is the Spirit; they want a Church as Master that exercises power to control and condemn, if need be, every believer's slightest thought or impulse.

They detest Vatican II because it did away with the pseudo-guilt that made good people feel uneasy or unclean about even the healthy aspects of being human, such as having sexual feelings and the desire for union that goes with genuine love. They want to overturn Vatican II because it placed the dignity of the human person at the center of its deliberations and as the subject of its extraordinary documents. They dislike Vatican II precisely because it did away with the imaginary guilt that these out-of-touch reformers need to fill up their out-of-style vehicles of spiritual life.

The church they long to restore, but lack the fuel to run, was indeed a powerful force that could get people coming and going and give them a phony speeding ticket as facilely as a traffic cop on the take. Indeed, "Catholic guilt" remains a staple for literary critics who think that artists, such as playwright Eugene O'Neill, found their inspiration in the guilt that once seemed to permeate the lives of their people, no matter how hard they tried or how good they really were.

Nothing is more human or natural than the sexual feelings or imaginings that course through ordinary people every day. If, as in a prime distortion of the dead and gone Catholic Culture, you could make people feel that

each one of these was -- if the person so much as hesitated no longer than it takes to smell a beautiful flower or savor a taste of fine wine -- always and ever an occasion of serious sin, then you could make them feel needlessly guilty and in dire and urgent need of absolution in the confessional. If a person could be made to feel guilty for taking healthy pride in some achievement, then you could ruin their day and make them feel senselessly guilty even about their efforts to use their gifts wisely.

Many of the good men and women who entered seminaries and religious houses brought generous hearts but a cultural conditioning that made them feel guilty if they turned away from the idea. Many good people remained, against the grain of their truest selves, out of the counterfeit guilt piled on them by spiritual directors and others who insisted that God wanted them to stay.

I recall an 80-year-old priest who tearfully told me that he never really wanted to be ordained but that every time he tried to leave, he was made to feel guilty about departing, and was told that all he needed was "to want to want to be a priest." He made the best of it, as many married couples have of relationships that they were pressured to enter, but there is no way to measure how unhappy they were and how many other people that, incidentally and unintentionally, they infected with their own sorrows.

The inability of these romantic reformers to find the fuel of guilt to keep their enterprise on the road explains the midsummer madness of the cardinal who has decreed that Catholics may only receive the Eucharist on the tongue while standing or the bishops of England and Wales who want to restore meatless Fridays. Granted that the latter is a great symbol but they will never again make Catholics feel that they commit a mortal sin equal to that of murder for forgetfully nibbling on a pig-in-the-blanket at a Friday cocktail party.

Pope Benedict XVI plans to emphasize the sacrament of penance at the forthcoming World Youth Day but, wonderful as the sacrament of forgiveness is, not even he will persuade people to feel that they are guilty of real sin when they are distracted at prayers or feel discouraged about life.

Catholics cut down on confession not because they abandoned the idea of sin but because they discovered the meaning of sin and realized that it was much different in many of its social dimensions than the personal foibles they had been trained to feel guilty about in the pre-Vatican II Church.

The Reform of the Reform is therefore doomed because it can no longer make healthy people feel unhealthy and unnecessary guilt about being human. That is why, when once asked why he convened Vatican II, Pope John XXIII replied not with a discourse on the sinful world but with perhaps the most Catholic sentence spoken by any pontiff in the 20th century: "To make the human sojourn on earth less sad."

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