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Top news of 2011: the gathering consensus for reform

Robert McClory | Jan. 3, 2012

VIEWPOINT

One of the most interesting news stories of 2011 was the increasing number of countries in which Catholic priests have issued statements urging radical church reform. In most cases the declaration included a call for the ordination of married men and the ordination of women. In Germany, Austria, Ireland and Belgium, these remarkable documents quickly attracted growing endorsements from other clergy and laity. However, in every case they also aroused questions, doubts and strong disagreement from other quarters. These movements must be stopped, declared some critics, calling the declarations blasphemy, heresy, an affront to legitimate authority and cause for the excommunication of their leaders and proponents.

I would like to suggest that, as troubling such calls for reform may seem to some, they are neither heretical nor contrary to Catholic tradition when viewed over the long sweep of history. Even conservative theologians and historians accept the fact that in the early centuries each local church believed it had within itself, thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit, everything necessary to enliven and build up the community. They were not waiting for permission from Rome or elsewhere to proceed. So they regularly chose one of their members to serve as leader or overseer -- that is, as bishop (episcopus) -- and, as such, to preside at the Eucharist. The chosen one felt a strong obligation to accept this appointment (ordinatio) -- as testified in the writings of Cyprian, Augustine and Ambrose (who had not yet been baptized when the community tapped him on the shoulder). These communities also felt they had the right, as baptized members of Christ, to select elders (presbyters) to assist in managing church affairs and deacons to care for the needs of the poor, orphans and widows.

The death, departure or disappearance of one of these key figures did not throw a community into panic. They had only to pick another member to lead and preside at the Eucharist or to carry on the functions of a departed deacon and elder. In the early centuries, these persons were not viewed as intrinsically different or superior by reason of their position. They were simply serving in ministry, and when they ceased serving for whatever reason, they reverted to simple membership in the church. The distinction between clergy and laity would only come later.

Gradually, of course, these communities grew larger. The duties of bishop, presbyter and deacon expanded. Presbyters in time evolved into priests presiding at the Eucharist, since the bishop could not personally cover all the community?s spreading centers of worship.

The sheer growth and size of the church through the first millennium (with all its political and societal upheavals) guaranteed that complications and problems would multiply. Church synods and councils began to establish rules, regulations and formulas to create a measure of uniformity. The old notion of church order shifted, especially regarding the understanding of the special character of bishops and priests. By the second millennium the Roman Catholic church had become a clearly organized institution of power and influence in the Western world. Yet it would continue to change into the 19th and 20th centuries.

I?m not claiming all this change was a bad thing. Some of it was unfortunate, some absolutely necessary. The

church had to change, or it would have died. What I hear these many voices of priests and laity saying today is that the church must change, again. Just as it shifted in the old past, due to social, demographic and political changes, it must shift in this present for similar reasons. The church?s situation in many countries today more nearly resembles its status in a much earlier time -- priests so scarce that the Sunday Eucharist becomes a rarity. Clearly, this is a growing phenomenon in the United States and Western Europe. It is a far greater problem in the churches of Africa and Asia. So why not revert -- at least for a time -- to an older church order, one that chose (and thereby ordained) its own members to carry on the vital ministries? Surely, we all assume those Eucharists of the first millennium were sacramentally valid and spiritually beneficial to those who received Communion. Surely, the Holy Spirit is with us still.

And isn?t this what the Second Vatican Council told us to do: read the signs of the times and respond creatively?

[Robert McClory, a longtime contributor to *NCR*, lives in Chicago.]

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