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Bishop ponders reasons Americans leave Catholic church

Richard McBrien | Jan. 2, 2012 Essays in Theology

Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., is the only U.S. bishop I know of who has explicitly taken into account the report of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that appeared more than two years ago and found that one in 10 Americans has left the Catholic church.

Thus, if ex-Catholics were a denomination unto themselves, they would constitute the second largest, behind only the Catholic church itself.

Bishop Hubbard is also one of the few bishops who was known and respected by the Catholics of the Albany diocese when he was named in 1977. Today, the frequently heard comments after a bishop has been appointed are: "Who is he? Where is he from?" or "Oh my God, not him!"

Bishop Hubbard has been writing a series of monthly articles in his diocesan paper, *The Evangelist*, regarding the departure of so many Catholics from the church. His initial column attributed the fall-off to the usual suspects: the loss of a sense of sin, individualism, rampant consumerism, secularism and so forth.

But he received some feedback to these articles. Readers noted that he had "neglected to acknowledge ways in which the church itself has contributed to the alienation of many of its members and to its lack of appeal, especially to younger people."

Other bishops would do well to read his column, "Failings of the Church," in *Origins*, November 17, 2011, vol. 41, no. 24.

At the top of his list of failings is the sexual abuse scandal in the priesthood. The problem was "not only that a number of priests betrayed the sacred bond of trust by sexually abusing minors, but more significantly there is a disillusionment and a loss of faith created by the way we bishops engaged in negligent retention and placed the image of the church before the protection and well-being of children and vulnerable youth."t

One has only to look to Ireland to see the negative effects of the sexual abuse crisis on a country that is far more Catholic in its population and social traditions than the United States or Canada.

"Many Catholics ... have been appalled by the fact that church leaders have not acknowledged sincerely and convincingly the reality of what happened, assumed responsibility for it and brought about the conversion of mind and heart which alone can rectify it."

"Truly," Bishop Hubbard declared, "clergy sexual abuse and its handling by the hierarchy are self-inflicted wounds -- born of clericalism, power and secrecy -- that will take a long time to heal."

He also mentioned parish closures and mergers, but gave little space to them. He devoted more print to what he called "anemic parish life." He referred to the problem of cliquishness and the difficulty many new members have to fit in.

"But surely," he wrote, "inclusiveness and hospitality should be high priorities in a parish ..."

Then he listed "pastoral insensitivity" as another reason why so many Catholics are alienated from the church. Here all-too-familiar complaints surfaced, among them parents whose child is denied baptism because they are not regular church-goers, couples who are denied marriage because they are not registered parishioners, or family members who are prohibited from saying a few words about the deceased at the end of the liturgy of Christian burial.

Of course, there are always complaints about poor liturgies and homilies. The latter are too often "canned," with little to do with the Scriptural readings of the day or the daily realities of the congregation. Neither do the music selections reinforce the liturgical theme of the Sunday.

The reason why the church has lost so many younger members, Bishop Hubbard continued, is that the younger people are technologically proficient. They are wedded to their cellphones and the Internet, including Facebook, Twitter, blogs and websites.

He asks if parish and diocesan websites are imaginative, easy to navigate, full of live links and are continually updated and redesigned.

Finally, many Catholics feel unaccepted or exploited. These include women generally, the separated or divorced, the single parent, the gay or lesbian person, and those who cannot fully accept the moral leadership of the hierarchy, especially on issues related to human sexuality and reproduction. (The last is only alluded to in Bishop Hubbard's list, but many Catholics do complain about the fixation of bishops on such issues as abortion and gay marriage.)

"Some people," Bishop Hubbard concluded his column, "find the church too traditional; others too progressive." In my opinion, however, it is not a 50/50 problem. There are many more disaffected Catholics who feel that the church has abandoned the path marked out by the Second Vatican Council.

But that's for another time.

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