

Former Dominican sees church's demise as blessing in disguise

Jamie Manson | Mar. 26, 2012 Grace on the Margins

It has been 20 years since Matthew Fox was expelled from the Dominican order after a 12-year battle with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In the decades since, Fox has continued writing, teaching and ministering to various communities. In 1994, he was welcomed into the Anglican Communion as an Episcopal priest. Fox has authored 28 books, the most recent being [*The Pope's War: Why Ratzinger's Secret Crusade Has Imperiled the Church and How It Can Be Saved*](#) [1]. The book has been translated into German, and the Italian version will be released this week.

In addition to this work, Fox spends much of his energy engaging with young adults who are interested in activism and spirituality. In a telephone interview last week, I talked with Fox about the key themes from his recent book and about his current projects with young spiritual activists.

Manson: You have been an Episcopal priest for 14 years, yet you're still writing about the Catholic church and speaking to Catholics. Do you still consider yourself a Catholic?

Fox: I consider myself an Episcopal priest, but I never found any documents that said I'm no longer a Catholic priest or a Catholic. As I say in my most recent book, I'm for dropping the word Roman from Catholic and getting it back to its real meaning.

So, would you say that you're Catholic but not Roman Catholic?

My hesitation is that I'm just not into putting myself into categories. I write about "post-denominational" time, which is a phrase I first learned when I received my letter of expulsion from the Dominicans. We're in a time when language has to catch up with reality, so putting me or anyone else in a box is hard to do. I was expelled at 54 years of age. You don't undo 54 years of being Catholic -- it's much too rich for that. I have a whole list of gifts that I was given by the Roman Catholic Church, but obviously I'm moving toward something that is beyond the boxes of denominations.

In *The Pope's War*, you have a chapter called "Treasures from the Burning Building: What is Worth Saving?" What from the Catholic tradition do you most want to rescue?

Certainly the mystical and prophetic figures: Hildegard, Aquinas, Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Francis of Assisi. All these great mystics were really reformers, too. Also, the great 20th century souls, from the whole base community movement South America, Bishop Casigalida, Bishop Camera, Leonardo Boff, Dorothy Day, Bede Griffiths, Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, Thomas Berry. There is a lot of richness that needs to be taken along, but we have travel so much lighter in the 21st century. We can't carry basilicas on our backs.

So the church should be not only post-denominational, but post-institutional, too?

We have to move away from looking at religion as primarily a sociologically institutional vestment and start seeing it as yeast within society that raises up justice, compassion, healing, celebration, forgiveness and, of

course, creativity. Leonardo Boff talks about "ecclesiogenesis," or "birthing church." What kinds of communities are we birthing? And what kinds of nonsense are we standing up to? There are forms of fundamentalism arising throughout Christianity and they are hijacking the real spirit that Jesus unleashed. We have to save Jesus from the church.

Do you think people must begin seeking church outside the walls of the institution?

Definitely. It's so clear that the institutional version of the church is melting before our eyes. I began *The Pope's War* with a quote from Fr. Bede Griffiths, who said to me at the very end of his life, "Don't even think about the Vatican. Don't look over your shoulder. It'll all come tumbling down one day like the Berlin Wall. Keep using your energy to grow new shoots."

We are ready for a new era in Christianity. It doesn't mean we surrender our own traditions or roots. But there is such a thing as ecclesiolatry. Some people would rather worship the church and hide inside an institution while throwing darts and bombs at the so-called secular world out there. The truth is there is only one world, one creation. We have to stand up to ideology, which is like idolatry. It freezes up hearts, minds and souls. We have to listen to the Holy Spirit. She elects to make things new. The Holy Spirit has always been biased in favor of creativity.

Do you think this melting down of the institutional church could be part of the Holy Spirit's plans?

Absolutely. The premise of *The Pope's War* is that we've been given two schismatic popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, over the past three decades for a reason. And that is to shake us up so that we will press the restart button on Christianity.

Why do you call John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI schismatic?

In the book, I tell the story of Fr. [Edward] Schillebeeckx, a great Catholic theologian whom I respect tremendously. He brought this issue of schism to my attention years ago, when the Dutch Dominicans were offering me asylum. He told me, and this is a quote, "I and many other European theologians believe the present papacy [of John Paul II] is in schism." And my response was, well, what are we going to do about it? And though he never said a word, he looked at me with this face that said, "You Americans are so naive, you think you can do something about it."

Why would Schillebeeckx use such a strong word?

Schism is a heavy word theologically and historically. But I think it applies to the previous pope and the present pope because they have trumped the Second Vatican Council. The truth, according to Catholic theology, is that councils trump popes, popes don't trump councils. All of the reforms of Vatican II have been erased. This is pretty serious in terms of the history of the church.

But what it also means is that any Catholic who is following the principles and spirit of Vatican II is free to carry on those principles because the church is now elsewhere. We have to put on your hunter-gatherer consciousness in order to look for real communities and give birth to new ones.

So many in the church justice movement are still experiencing profound disappointment that the Roman Catholic Church has not instituted the reforms of Vatican II. Is Schillebeeckx right? Are they just naïve?

In my book, I do speak of the need to grieve. Every Catholic, and indeed every Christian, needs to grieve what was lost when the hope and promise of Vatican II was undermined by the last 40 years of church history. And with the grieving comes new creativity to birth the church anew. I believe the Holy Spirit is still at work and has

given us two schismatic popes for a purpose.

Do you feel like some Catholics can get stuck in their grief over being denied the real reforms of Vatican II?

I think some are, but I think some are so stuck in the stage of anger that they are frozen. Anger is not a creative place to be. Some have given up on it all. You only have so much energy to put into it. This one generation that was all fired up and generous and moving along with Vatican II is dying out. And the new generation of bishops and cardinals is of one ilk. In Latin America, more and more are Opus Dei. And now in its present form, the institution is appointing its own people exclusively. Unfortunately, the institution outlasts individuals. This is just going to go on and on.

Do you think some of the laity are in denial about this reality?

I think denial is something that is so evident in the church today. Now and then, I get letters from Catholic leaders telling me how wonderful it is to work with the pope. And I have to laugh because I know it isn't true. Many are hiding in their grief, but many are also hiding in their denial. Catholics have to get out of the denial because they are not seeing the world accurately. You're not going to renew something if you don't admit that it has a disease.

Naming denial is extremely important because it is a shadow. Evil does not like a light shined on it. By naming our denial and grief, we take it out of the shadowy, secret world. Only then we can talk about it and come up with medicine.

So where are reform-minded Catholics supposed to find hope?

Intelligent Catholics who think about their grandchildren and not just themselves have to realize that the game is over as it's been played. But again, *this* is the good news. It's a great moment for the Holy Spirit to move in and reinvent things. And that's where we should be putting our energy.

This is part one of a two-part interview. [Part two can be found here](#)[2].

[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: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: [Email alert sign-up](#) [3]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/26/2015 - 11:44): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/former-dominican-sees-churchs-demise-blessing-disguise>

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/28326>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/node/29620>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>