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Is the Roman Catholic Church downsizing into a sect?

Jamie Manson | May. 24, 2012 Grace on the Margins

Much has been made in recent months about an ad placed in *The New York Times* urging liberal and nominal Catholics to "quit the church" because it can never be changed from within, and to participate in it is to cooperate with its oppressive system.

The ad was paid for by an organization called the Freedom from Religion Foundation. But the more I reflect on both the ad and the behavior of our hierarchy lately, there is part of me that wouldn't be surprised if we learned that the Vatican itself had secretly paid for the advertisement.

With its attacks on same-sex marriage, battle against providing adequate health care for women, hostile takeover of LCWR and inquisition into the Girl Scouts, the hierarchy continues to make itself an embarrassing media spectacle in a society that long ago refused to accept the teaching on birth control, believes in women's equality and increasingly supports [1] same-sex marriage.

Even those who are not affected directly by these ideological battles find it odious that hierarchy is choosing to spend precious money and resources on lawsuits against the Obama administration and bizarre new campaigns like the Fortnight for Freedom [2].

Church leaders seem hell-bent on disenfranchising the greatest number of laity possible.

The question is, Why? Why is the hierarchy acting like the new boss who so wants to rid himself of the staff he inherited, he makes it as uncomfortable as possible for them to stay in the organization? Has the church leadership made a decision to downsize? Have they realized that the $2.2 billion in sex abuse settlements and the rapidly dwindling number of priests in the United States has rendered the church unable to provide for the needs of 72 million Catholics?

Perhaps all of these ideological battles -- which, we are told, are grounded in Pope Benedict's desire for a smaller, more faithful church -- are really all about the money, or lack thereof. More than one commentator has suggested [3] that the endgame in the crackdown on LCWR could be to recapture property, assets and pension reserves from religious communities.

Unfortunately, if the hierarchy continues on this path of mass disenfranchisement, what will result isn't a smaller, more faithful church, but an insular, countercultural sect.

In their book *The Sacred Quest* [4], scholars Lawrence Cunningham and John Kelsay describe characteristics of a church and a sect. They rely on the groundbreaking work of the early 20th century German scholar Ernst Troeltsch, who first made this distinction based on his observations of Europe, where established religious communities like the Church of England stood in contrast to dissident groups like the Quakers, whose religious beliefs cut them off from the greater culture of their country.

Cunningham and Kelsay define a church as "a religious community of some social standing that invites all

members of a society to take part in its activities, has a stake in the well-being of the larger social community, and claims to be the custodian of religious truth."

A sect, on the other hand, "tends to demand more conformity in its members, is exclusive in its membership, distances itself from the concerns of the larger society, and also claims to be the bearer of religious truth." Sects are "exclusivist, inward looking, and in some tension with larger culture." Examples of modern-day sects in our country would be the Amish or Hasidic Jews.

While the hierarchy and its devotees spend all of their time and energy exiling the "dissidents" in the church, it is they who are becoming dissidents in society. Benedict's call for radical obedience and refusal to be questioned sounds more like a sect's absolute demand for conformity than the call of a universal church.

The hierarchy's refusal to acknowledge the crucial need for contraception globally as well as a priesthood that includes women and married persons is a clear sign of their continued isolation from the concerns of society.

Some in the hierarchy and many of those in the neo-conservative movement have even returned to the pre-Vatican II notion that salvation can only come through the Roman Catholic Church.

Even the Catholic church's attire is becoming sect-like. Young seminarians and the newly ordained have become notorious for dragging lace-skirted albs, copes and maniples out of the church's moth-balled closets. And what *NCR* reader can forget Cardinal Raymond Burke's galero [5] or Bishop Edward James Slattery's display of the 20-yard-long cappa magna [6] at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception?

Who can be happy and at peace in the institutional church but those with extremist, counter-cultural views? Of course, one can argue that Jesus himself would have been considered extremist and countercultural in his day. But here's the difference: Jesus wasn't afraid of the world.

Jesus never allowed absolute obedience to the law to trump the pastoral needs of the person standing before him. He defied religious ritual for the sake of healing the suffering. He called everyone -- tax collector, rich man, woman, drunkard, prostitute -- to his table, no loyalty tests or confessions required.

The Roman Catholic Church is fast becoming a refuge for those who are afraid of the world. The church that, 50 years ago, called itself to be immersed in the modern world is instead shrinking away from society, refusing to engage in a meaningful, pastoral way with the human struggles and needs of our day.

The hierarchy is so caught up in ideology, it has forgotten that there are complex, human stories behind issues like contraception, women's ordination and same-sex marriage. It is no wonder they are so afraid of women religious, who have built up a church of integrity and moral credibility by immersing themselves in the reality of human life and by courageously engaging a world filled with suffering, brokenness, unpredictability and paradox.

Rather than allow the ministry of the church to grow and evolve with the human community, the hierarchy seems to be choosing the path of a religious splinter group. In doing so, they are willingly abandoning those who have endeavored for decades to remain faithful to the church, even through the disgrace of sex abuse and the gradual rescinding of the promises of Vatican II.

And when that generation of the faithful passes away, who among the new generations will find life and meaning in this church-cum-sect? Those who want to run away from a world in flux with suffering, uncertainty and the struggle for equality? Those who want to retreat into a fundamentalist enclave where European patriarchal males claim to have the absolute, unquestionable truth about God and our world?

Perhaps it is a "leaner, meaner" church the hierarchy and its devotees think they want. Perhaps that's all the leadership realistically sees itself being able to afford. Whatever the motivations, if they continue on this path, the hierarchy must accept that they will cease to be a church in the modern world, and rather will devolve into an exclusivist, insular sect.

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