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Author sees tradition as a liberating force

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FLYING IN THE FACE OF TRADITION: LISTENING TO THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE FAITHFUL
By Louis DeThomasis, FSC
Published by ACTA Publications, $12.95

For most of the past quarter of a century, Lasallian Br. Louis DeThomasis was the president of the small, if vibrant and expanding, St. Mary?s University in Winona, a town in southern Minnesota on the state?s eastern border with Wisconsin.

The university was hardly a hotbed of Catholic radicalism, and DeThomasis was not on the Vatican?s radar screen as a major dissenter. But during his 24 years at the university, DeThomasis was discreetly stowing away observations, often very critical of the church he served. When he retired in 2005, he felt freed of the restraints that go with leading a Catholic institution, and finally gathered his thoughts into what eventually was published as a slim but forceful volume titled *Flying in the Face of Tradition: Listening to the Lived Experience of the Faithful*.

The 100 pages of text is an extended, urgent essay, a warning from the realm of lived experience meant to penetrate the seeming indifference of members of the hierarchy to the mess that keeps piling up around them in a scandal-plagued institution that is losing its youngest members. The 71-year-old brother is the quintessential company man in many respects, distinguished not only as an educator and for his administrative abilities but also for his success as an investor of his order?s money. He is cofounder and head of Christian Brothers Investment Services, headquartered in Rome, where he now resides.

At the same time, he joins a growing list of insiders willing to take a swing at the church?s Berlin Wall of corruption and dysfunction around which the milling crowds keep growing, hoping for some kind of breakthrough.

DeThomasis concentrates the critique at the start with the question: ?Is the institutional church dying?? To which he answers: ?Yes. And even though it may be polite to add ?unfortunately,? I offer no such qualification. I believe that the death of the institutional church as we all know it can be the last opportunity for it to transform itself into something that once again is able to carry out its original purpose.?

For advancing far more subtle arguments and for writing that is far more theologically complex than that found in *Flying in the Face of Tradition*, priests and women religious have been subjected to questioning, censored, silenced and removed from their positions.

DeThomasis said he thought long about writing the book and thought through the range of consequences, which could include expulsion from his order.

In a Skype interview May 10 from Australia, where he was on a tour promoting the book for his Australian publisher, he recalled that when he left the presidency of the university he said to himself, ?Well, now, be brave and do it -- and be prepared for the consequences.?

He said he felt compelled to write the book because during his career at St. Mary?s he had seen the church losing young people who ?were just finding the church not speaking to them.? Even worse, DeThomasis said, was the growing awareness that the church was also losing the older population. He describes a ?solemn, silent schism? in American Catholicism, one in which those who stay in the church find it increasingly irrelevant.

He said he decided to ?speak out? because ?I care for the church ... and I know a lot of the things that I am saying quite a few bishops would love to say that, but unfortunately they?re not saying that.? He hopes the book might give a few of them the courage to speak up.

One of the core problems, DeThomasis writes, is the current preponderance of ?ideologues? in the hierarchical ranks. In their brand of teaching, he says, ?no dialogue is allowed. No questions may be raised. Take it or leave seems to be the basic message,? and many are leaving.

Such either/or messages won?t work with Catholics ?who can and do think for themselves and certainly no longer view docility and acquiescence to church officials as a requirement for faith. This is especially true when the purveyors of the ideology, by their action or inaction, have lost any claim to legitimate authority, which is the case in the Catholic Church today,? he writes.

He claims that the ideologues, who so often lean on tradition, have an incorrect understanding of it. ?Tradition is a way for the People of God, which is the church, to read the signs of the times and invent the future. It is a liberating force, not an inhibiting one.?

The information age, the advances of other technologies, the massive changes wrought by globalization mean that the church must see the new circumstances as opportunity, not as ?an attack on its very existence.?

In one of his shortest chapters he lays out what he views as an inevitability, and this largely deduced from ?lived experience?: the case for ordaining women. He describes movement toward ordination of women as ?a piece of ?tradition in motion.? ?

DeThomasis said he believes the deepest solution to the problems the church faces today lies in Catholic education in the future. And he has lots of experience and lots to say about that. Another book, on that topic, is already in the pipeline.

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