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The future of the church: Discernment or intimidation?

Joan Chittister | Nov. 16, 2012 From Where I Stand

I get a lot of questions in my mail, many of them personal, many of them professional -- meaning ones that are usually requests for comments or articles. One of the professional ones taught me more about the present state of the church than much else could possibly have done.

The article being requested was to have been part of a survey of responses to questions raised in one of their previous publications. The question asked how religious might go about educating the laity to take a discerning and respectful role in their capacity as part of the *sensus fidelium*.

The question assumed, of course, that the position of the faithful and the position of the official teaching magisterium might differ on the issues in question.

It was, I thought, a realistic question in a period of so much cultural and social transformation and might profit by being considered from the perspective of the research on social change. So I?lll tell you what I wrote.

You can decide for yourself how dangerously destructive of the church it is.

> This question, I wrote, brings together a trio of issues that underlie resistance to any major movement for cultural change but which must be considered in the course of any major social shift.
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> They are:
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> 1. Obedience: What if the institution disapproves of change in this particular issue?
> 2. Scripture: What does the Gospel demand in this situation regardless of present institutional norms?
> 3. What if change is spiritually imperative but impossible structurally?
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> The very nature of social change itself must be a major consideration for those whose commitment is to minister in a society in flux. Social change is not an event, it is a process.
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> Once it has begun, the change has already happened. Only the process of adoption is left. It is the process of change itself that must be understood if ministers are to be the bridge between the Holy Spirit and the institution.
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> The fact is that once change has begun in a system, the options for dealing with it are limited and mutually exclusive. We can either simply ignore both the question and the questioners or we can ignore the present state of social shift and its effect on both the question and the questioners.
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> But neither is possible. Social consciousness is a social force. Major social questions do not go away and change, once begun, will come either peacefully or destructively. Ask the few people

who went to the barricades in the French Revolution about the truth of that. Or the sisters who struggled through renewal in the course of Vatican II.

Or the 82 percent of Catholics who consider other practices of birth control, beyond natural family planning, moral. Despite what seemed to be ponderous institutional resistance in each instance, concern for institutional approbation floundered in the end under the tide of change.(Gallup Poll, May 2012 [1])

It is possible to repress change temporarily -- to slow change, to resist change, to deny change -- but it is impossible to stop a change whose time has come. It is impossible to ignore change once it has begun to well up through the cracks in the cement of a society, however rigid the barriers to it.

Repressed, people will resist. Ignored, people will remove themselves from an arthritic society. Unheard and unheeded, blocked and obstructed, the seed of a new idea simply grows like ground pine until the ideas break out everywhere and evolution that could have been handled by a process of peaceful reform gives way to unmanageable revolution. Ask the King and Queen of France.

Clearly, for the sake of the society itself, it is imperative that people minister reflectively and consciously at a time like this. Otherwise, in trying to preserve its past, an institution may well destroy the life of its living mission. People will ignore it, deride it, resist it or abandon it.

So what can ministers do in situations like this:

First, the minister must understand that early signs of change and innovation engage only about 2.5 percent of any society. This is the time to begin to talk about the implications of change theologically, psychologically, institutionally.

To suppress the question now can only delay its coming and, at the same time, increase its impact when it does. The question of women?s place in the church, let alone the issue of the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, for instance, has been ignored at the highest levels of the church despite the growing demand for attention among the faithful.

Nevertheless, the sense of inevitability has continued unabated in society at large and affected people?s attitudes toward the church -- much in the same way the birth control issue did as well. As a result, both issues have already broken the boundaries of the institution.

Second, openness about emerging issues and good theoretical preparation must fill in the gap between institutional readiness to consider the questions and the resistance fatigue in the people. To deny the question will only, in the long run, reduce the credibility of the minister on other issues as well as on the question at hand.

Change comes in three phases. The number of innovators -- early adherents of change -- who have already left the church over these issues, for instance, have gone from trickle to stream. Second level change agents, early adaptors, comprise about 13.5 percent of a population.

The problem is that we are well beyond that already. Surveys tell us that third level change, the point at which another 34 percent of the population have begun to experience tension between belief and practice, is already here.

Acceptance of the idea of women priests by the majority, if the polls are correct, is then already in

the popular psyche. The psychological impact of that kind of spiritual stress between scriptural values and institutional norms takes a toll on people?s sense of commitment.

It is a dangerous time for any institution; it is a time for bridge-builders who will admit the truth of the situation and keep the faith at the same time.

Third, in these in-between moments of life, in times lived in the already-but-not-yet vacuum between ideals and practice, ministry demands commitment to openness, to exploration of ideas, to education, to spiritual reflection, and to discussion.

In this period, practices that not only sustain the faith of the faithful but grow the ideas and spiritual practice from the ground up -- in ways new to the institution but within the historic vision of the institution ? are essential to maintain the link between what is possible and what is desired. The motto of this time must be, ?If not for us, then because of us.?

During this time, more engagement than ever in liturgical life and spiritual reflection is necessary. Outreach to others, on-going education and the development of spiritual practices that model, strengthen and stretch the participation of both women and men broaden the scope of the Christian community.

These opportunities for women to play new roles in both community and ministry lay the foundation for a laity that is ready to be the new church in a church whose past is fading fast.

Change never comes to everyone at once. Change, in fact, comes slowly. It has been said that it takes a hundred years for a council of the church to be received. It is 50 years after Vatican II.

What more proof of that insight do we need? Our role is to take women into the depth of the spiritual life in our own communities, to sustain their faith, to educate their minds, to deepen their souls for the journey and to unleash their gifts for the sake of the church.

No doubt about it: There is a great deal for us to do on this issue even when it seems that there is nothing we are able to do at all. The time is coming and is now at hand, all the numbers of all the facets of church now say, when the Holy Spirit will once again change history.

It?s important for us to do our part, boldly, bravely and with great faith that the time between Vatican I is what brought Vatican II and that this time, our time, will just as surely bring Vatican III when all things are in the fullness of time.

So, that?s the end of the article, but it?s not the end of the story: The article was never published.

The group that had solicited it -- some of the best educated and most effective women religious I know -- wrote back that though the article clearly addressed the question, they were afraid to publish it ?for fear their local bishop would see it.?

From where I stand, I have no idea if their assessment of their local bishop is correct. I hope not. But I do know that if that?s true, we are in a pitiable state as a church.

How can the laity come to understand the important role the *sensus fidelium* plays in the growth of the church if religious themselves fail to set that model?

And more important, what kind of a church are we -- or can we ever become -- if our religious are afraid to print

an answer to a question important to the life of the church and our bishops do more to intimidate the membership than to model the Jesus they preach?

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Links:
[1] http://www.gallup.com/poll/154799/americans-including-catholics-say-birth-control-morally.aspx