

Vatican implosions really first-order Space & Information Age effects

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Dec. 14, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

That noise you hear coming from the Vatican, according to Robert Mickens, one of the most experienced and trustworthy observers of the church, arises not from the clang of cell doors on papal butlers taking one for the system, but from the "implosion" of the system itself. Mickens, former editor of the London-based *Tablet*, tells us that, we are witnessing "the collapse of an entire system, structure, ethos, and culture."

In a talk to the City Club of Cleveland, whose members know first-hand the rumble of a distressed diocese, Mickens said that the falling plaster drifts down from the sumo wrestler-like contests "watch out for the crockery and mother's picture on the mantle" of green-eyed prelates vying for red-dyed promotions.

It comes as well from the metastasized corruption; cronyism among the usual suspects of bishops and cardinals; the Keystone Cops flavor of l'affaire Vatileaks; the number of Catholics heading for what P.T. Barnum termed the "egress;" and crises that have burdened good priests with the burdens left by those less good, those carriers of "clericalism," the infection that causes swelling of the head and untreatable growths on the ego.

Mickens portrays a tragic but poignant collapse, and while he rightly attributes its onset to the double-team efforts of Blessed Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI to restore a self-centered and therefore self-consuming church, the implosion may be read in another way, as well.

The "implosion" is actually a first-order effect of the Space and Information Age. First-order effects can be observed all around us, most of all in institutions that, like the church, developed their power and control as hierarchical structures. These include "big business" that, puzzled by the sudden loss of efficiency in the hierarchical model, pragmatically slashed the mid-level ranks that the Space and Information Age made expendable.

Classic hierarchically structured institutions, such as higher education and medicine, which like the church exercised unquestioned power in large spheres of American life, found their influence wane as the Space and Information Age took hold. Membership in the one-time powerhouse of the American Medical Association has declined in their version of a vocation shortage. Less than a third of America's doctors are now members.

Companies hierarchical by definition, such as General Motors, found themselves vulnerable to more nimble Japanese carmakers, a first-order effect. Second-level effects followed in their plunge into wild, expensive and largely ineffective experiments to find new forms. In other big companies these included knocking down all office walls and placing the CEO's desk in the middle, and resorting to pizzas with everything on them as models for restructuring their operations.

We are now so accustomed to first-order effects in this new age that we hardly name them as such. These include the death and decline of newspapers and magazines, and the emergence of Amazon.com as one of the world's largest retailers, despite the fact that it has no stores. Shopping on the Internet has made what is called Cyber Monday after Thanksgiving a rival to the in-store shopping of the Friday following that feast. Why do you think big-box stores, such as Best Buy and other retailers, complain that they have become display rooms

for products that customers inspect and then go home and purchase on the Internet?

We hardly notice many second-order effects, such as Walgreen's changing its entrance and exit doors so that you can enter or exit to the right or the left, a subtle but real reflection that in space there is no up or down, left or right. So, too, Nike's Michigan Avenue store in Chicago was designed without the usual entry way with its centrality as a port to other departments, leaving customers to function without the directional signals of an earlier era.

The advent of the Space and Information Age coincided almost exactly with Vatican II in 1962. In fact, the great talk at the opening of the council by Blessed Pope John XXIII, in which he opened the church to the world again, was carried live via Telstar, one of the first Space and Information Age satellite transmission systems, so that he could be seen and heard simultaneously across all the world's time zones.

Telstar collapsed the layers of hierarchy through which papal statements were ordinarily filtered, and leapt over the barriers of control or censorship by the curia in a direct transmission of his words to all hearers. The first great movement of the council fathers was to break the waxen seal on the agenda prepared for them by the curia, toss it into the Tiber, and begin to frame one in the immediacy of the moment. Unannounced, the Space and Information Age had opened for the Roman Catholic church.

Curialists and traditionalists have been scrambling to recover from the impact of what has followed ever since. The implosions reported by Mickens are, so to speak, symptoms of a hierarchical structure's increasingly agitated and transparent efforts to escape the Space and Information Age and to restore its multi-leveled glory and its emphasis on Roman rather than Catholic in the church's self-understanding.

Recently, a third-order Space and Information Age effect occurred when an Austrian priest was stripped of his honorific title, Monsignor, by powers in the Vatican who would not be identified for an offense that could not be named. Thus, a title derived from medieval court protocol was stripped away by a skeletal hand rising from the hierarchical graveyard. If it did not make the official church look ridiculous, it would be a touching tale of the collateral human damage of an imploding clerical culture.

What Mickens so acutely observes is exactly what happens when a hierarchical system on which people had built their lives and careers, much like the first class down to steerage passenger plan of the Titanic, slices open its hull on the seppuku sword of the Space and Information Age iceberg, killing itself and the age of class distinctions it had symbolized and celebrated.

At such a time, heroes emerge to sacrifice themselves to save others. But many do anything, pushing people aside to save themselves in a last scramble that left many lifeboats unfilled as they drifted away from the Titanic into the cold darkness. As it turned out, the designers were so confident of their vessel's impregnability, that they did not provide enough lifeboats. That leads to chaos, to clawing efforts for survival and heartbreaking scenes of nobility and loss.

Vatican II had, in fact, provided a lifeboat that was also a lifeline for survival in the Space and Information Age. The council fathers returned to the doctrine of collegiality that recognized that bishops have authority in their own right and do not have it as a delegation from the Pope. The council recognized the authority of individual bishops and of national conferences to deal with problems in their regions. Collegiality offered a structure ideal for the new age.

That is why Blessed Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI collaborated to downplay and destroy collegiality and to restore the hierarchical form in the church. Pope Benedict XVI says that he will settle for a smaller church. That's a good thing because his efforts to return to the past are motivating many Catholics to leave in the present. They sense that times have changed and are ready to embrace them. Curialists sense that

times have changed and want to flee them as quickly as they can, pushing and shoving to save themselves. What Mickens so well describes as an 'implosion' is the result.

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