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The top five ëmissing mega-trends' shaping Catholicism

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 28, 2006 All Things Catholic

Last week, I presented a draft list of ten ?mega-trends? which I believe are shaping the future of the Catholic church, and asked for reader reaction. I was stunned by the response. In addition to the public comments on the NCR site, I received scores of personal messages, most of them deeply thoughtful and well-informed. Though I can?t respond personally, please know that I am grateful, and I hope my forthcoming book is equal to the quality of your contributions.

(This is not to say, of course, that everyone was thrilled by the exercise. One disgruntled reader weighed in with a complaint that I seemed to be "abandoning" my role as a Vatican correspondent for "the meaningless career of a futurist. What a shame! What a loss!")

One point I probably could have made more clear is that I intend this as a descriptive exercise. What I?m after are not ideas or movements that *should* shape the future of Catholicism, but those that, based on the available evidence, actually are doing so. Many readers wrote to make impassioned arguments for a cause, and if I don?t include it, it?s not a judgment on its merits. It?s rather that I don?t see evidence the church is moving in that direction, or that it represents one of the most consequential currents in Catholic life.

Many readers wrote to tweak the way I presented one or more of the mega-trends. (Several made the argument, for example, that the sex abuse crisis by itself does not constitute a mega-trend; as one reader put it, it?s more akin to an earthquake than a shifting plate. The deeper trend, some suggested, is a press toward new systems of accountability and governance in the church, linked to the question of lay participation.)

Others wrote to propose additional trends. Sorting through the responses, I compiled a list of 48 such suggestions, ranging from the status of divorced and remarried Catholics, to 20th century Marian apparitions. A few of these ideas appeared with such regularity, and with such solid arguments, that they probably represent additional mega-trends that, one way or the other, deserve to make the final list.

Herewith, based on your input, are the top five ?missing mega-trends,? based on the frequency with which they came up in your reactions. Whether these five, or for that matter any of the original 10, make the cut, or whether they?re re-framed or folded into something else, remains to be seen -- that?s the work of coming months.

One: Women in the church

By a wide margin, this was the most commonly cited omission from my list. Inevitably, the theme carries different connotations for different readers. Some see it in terms of debates over women?s ordination to the diaconate and/or priesthood. For others, it?s about a clash between a secular culture in the West ever more sensitive to issues of gender equality, and a church that still seems, at least to critics, to maintain a system of male privilege. Some readers point out that the Catholic church is increasingly dependent upon women to carry

out its basic ministries; if one were to add up all the female DREs, liturgists, pastoral associates, and so on, it would be crystal clear that Catholicism could not function without them, a reality that is transforming the sociology of the church. For others, the theme of ?women in the church? refers to efforts to articulate a ?new feminism,? inspired by John Paul II?s teaching on ?complementarity? between the sexes. This Christian feminism aims at a revitalization of women?s traditional roles as wives and mothers, without sacrificing their desire for personal and professional accomplishment. Still others see the question in terms of realizing possibilities for leadership in the church that do not require sacramental ordination, along the lines recently suggested at a Rome conference by Lucetta Scaraffia, a professor at Rome?s Sapienza University, and Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor and President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. As Glendon observed, the church?s defense of the all-male priesthood, which pivots in part on the claim that priesthood is about service rather than power, will ring hollow until people see women exercising real authority at senior levels, including in the Vatican. (Glendon herself is evidence that things seem to be moving slowly in that direction). In any event, such ferment makes it clear that struggles over the role of women, both in the church and in the broader culture, will undoubtedly be an important force in the near-term future of Catholicism.

Two: The crisis of secularism

In describing the rise of Islam, especially its more radical currents, I wrote last week that in some ways it represents the ?chief ideological rival? of the Catholic church. Several readers took issue with that formula, some out of sensitivity to Muslims, but others because they believe there?s a greater ideological foe: Western secularism, especially in Europe. Many pointed to the ?ecclesiastical winter? of contemporary Europe as a mega-trend. While sociologist Fr. Andrew Greeley has documented that ?de-Christianization? has not gripped Europe uniformly, nevertheless the indicators in many places are striking. In France, only around eight percent of Catholics attend Mass at least once a week, and more than 50 percent say they never go to church at all. In the Netherlands, the proportion of the population with no religious affiliation has gone from 23 percent to 59 percent in a single generation, prompting Greeley to observe that ?the Dutch may have become a pagan people almost overnight.? In a similar vein, vocations to the priesthood and religious life have plummeted. Fertility rates have also declined, with the lowest rates in human history currently being recorded in the traditional Catholic strongholds of Italy and Spain. Moreover, the church has scant influence in public life, as symbolized by the unwillingness of the European Union so much as to mention God in the preamble to its draft constitutional document. There?s also the rise of an increasingly pugnacious form of atheism, evidenced most recently by Richard Dawkins? book, *The God Delusion*, often premised on appeals to science. (Such formulae form part of the subtext for Cardinal Christoph Schönborn?s challenge in July 2005 to the theory of evolution). All this represents a serious challenge to the church in the West, and perceptions of such a crisis were at least partly responsible for the election of Joseph Ratzinger to the papacy. Diagnosis, however, is easier than cure. There will continue to be strong debate as to whether the solution is to ?modernize? the church, bringing it more into line with contemporary secular expectations -- or to reinforce its traditional identity, on the grounds that secularism poses a crisis not of structures or teachings, but of nerve.

Three: China

Many readers observed that China?s emergence as the next great global power carries enormous potential significance for the Catholic church. This is so for at least three interlocking reasons. First, in the 21st century China is poised not merely to act as a regional power in Asia, but to take its place alongside the traditional European ?superpowers? in terms of setting the global agenda. For a church concerned with forging a culture of solidarity and peace in the era of globalization, therefore, establishing a good working relationship with China is essential. This is part of the reason that establishing full diplomatic relations with China is at the very top of the Vatican?s international ?to-do? list. In addition, there?s the vexed question of religious freedom in China, which is of immediate importance for the estimated 13 million Catholics in China, divided between an official church sanctioned by the government and an underground church ferociously loyal to Rome. In the short term,

indications are that hardliners in the Communist regime have little interest in showing deference to Rome on matters such as the nomination of bishops. Even more consequentially, however, China is widely regarded as the last great missionary frontier on earth. It?s a nation of more than a billion people, with an obvious spiritual hunger left by the ideological implosion of Communism, and no strong national religious tradition. If China can be gradually cajoled into loosening the reins on religious liberty, many experts anticipate a wide-open ?free market? of missionary activity, with Christians and Muslims likely in the forefront. The future religious composition of Chinese society could have enormously important consequences for its cultural and political attitudes. There?s little question, therefore, that the complex yet tantalizing back-and-forth between China and Catholicism will occupy an increasing share of the church?s time and energy.

Four: The ?greening? of Christianity

Several readers found it odd that I omitted environmental concerns from the list of mega-trends, given that just the week before I wrote my column on precisely this subject, noting a growing convergence between Pope Benedict XVI and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople on ecological issues. In fact, I intended to include the environment under the broad heading of ?globalization,? since growing awareness of the interdependence of planetary systems is one of the factors driving a greater environmental sensitivity. Perhaps, however, the press for Christian ecology deserves to be a stand-alone mega-trend, based on two considerations. First is the obvious point that environmental neglect is no longer merely an aesthetic or moral concern, but one with important consequences for global stability. Benedict XVI, in his recent message for the World Day of Peace, warned of an ?unprecedented race for available resources,? especially with regard to energy supplies, stating that ?the violent hoarding of the earth?s resources causes grievances, conflicts and wars, precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development.? This reality will demand increasing levels of attention from the church, especially as leaders from the global South rise through the system. Second, the articulation of a specifically Christian theology of the environment is a special challenge given that some currents in secular environmentalism lean towards deification of nature and relativization of the uniqueness of the human person. The challenge for Roman Catholicism is thus to develop an ?environmentalism with teeth,? but one which does not further muddy already difficult questions about human nature and destiny.

Five: The Pentecostal Explosion

As several readers pointed out, any list of Catholic mega-trends that overlooks the astonishing growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical forms of Christianity worldwide cannot be complete. A recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life offers a comprehensive run-down of the numbers. According to the Pew research, today there are an estimated 500 million ?revivalists? in the world, including members of stand-alone Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations as well as charismatics within established denominations. Revivalists now represent one-quarter of the total Christian population of two billion, compared with just 6 percent of the Christian total 30 years ago. The ?Pentecostal wave? is the world?s fastest-growing religious movement, making especially strong inroads in the global South. At one level, this mega-trend means that Catholicism will be increasingly pushed in a charismatic direction, towards greater openness to the miraculous, the experience of healings and exorcisms, a more literal reading of Scripture, and more spontaneous styles of liturgical expression. In Brazil alone, the world?s largest Catholic country, almost half of the population describes itself as ?charismatic,? with profound consequences for how the faith is taught, preached, and lived. At another level, the ?Pentecostal wave? also creates new competition for Catholicism, given that a hefty percentage of the revivalists are defectors from the Catholic church. To take one example, a study commissioned in the late 1990s by CELAM, the Latin American Catholic bishops? conference, found that 8,000 Latin Americans were deserting the Catholic church for Evangelical Protestantism every day. Among other things, this competition for souls promises to reshape the ecumenical conversation; in 1992, John Paul II used the phrase ?ravenous wolves? to refer to Pentecostal and Evangelical ?sects? in Latin America, a more aggressive language that hints at a shift from détente to apologetics in inter-Christian relations. In whatever

fashion Catholicism chooses to approach the revivalists, including the growing number within its own fold, they are an unavoidable feature of the religious landscape.

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