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Will the Catholic church still be standing in a few generations?

Bill Tammeus | Jul. 11, 2012 A small c catholic

Like the oblivious frog sitting in the pot of water that's slowly coming to a boil, we often find it almost impossible to discern even historic changes while they're happening.

And sometimes when we guess at seismic shifts that may be occurring, we're embarrassingly wrong: Thomas Watson [1], IBM chairman in 1943, is (maybe falsely) reported to have said then: "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."

So I acknowledge I could be way off-base here. But from my Protestant, outside-Catholicism perspective, it looks as if the current hierarchical institutional expression of the Catholic church is dying and will be essentially gone in a few generations -- certainly in the U.S. Whether another form of the church will survive is unknowable.

As educator Richard Giannone correctly notes in his new memoir, *Hidden [2]*, "The history of Christianity as an organization has been a history of disagreeable confrontations with new forces at work in era after era. The church (his reference is to the Catholic church) is either unable, or unwilling, or scared to deal with the evolving society in which it lives and claims, often loudly, to serve."

Until recent decades, the church has been able to overcome this self-inflicted character flaw in various ways. It insisted, for instance, that it alone holds the key to salvation.

But in this post-modern era, when allegiance to almost all meta-narratives is quickly disintegrating, even that trump card won't cut it. The church -- if it's to adapt and not disappear with the blacksmiths, manual typewriters and Kodachrome film -- will have to return to its center, Christ Jesus, and to its mission.

I say this not to urge the Catholic church to become one more independent evangelical voice out there offering the false certitude of guaranteed paths to heaven. Rather, I say this to urge not just the Catholic church but the church universal to pay attention to the truth Giannone speaks when he writes, simply, this: "Community is the heart of Christianity."

And in true community, there's no room for unquestioning obedience to censorious powers. There must be, instead, room for doubt and forgiveness, for the freedom to share our fears, our hopes and especially our uncertainties.

The Catholic church seems more open to all of that today than it was prior to Vatican II [3]. But something has almost extinguished the spirit of that liberating time of reform, and the church once more is manning (the male reference is intended) the barricades against modernity, postmodernity and anything that may follow.

The church has great truths and traditions to defend, for sure, but I'm guessing it's on the verge of forfeiting any opportunity it might still have to provide a safe and welcoming place to people who cannot abide the church's mortifying history of defending superstitions against what science and their own experience tell them.

Once it was that Galileo was a heretic for proposing that the earth revolves around the sun. Now it is that men and women born with homosexual orientations are "objectively disordered."

Certain elements in the church's leadership may continue insisting that the church is just defending truth with a capital T, but increasingly, they are voices that embarrass, voices that stand out the way wing-nut snake-handlers stand out.

If the Catholic church is losing its grip, what of atomized Protestantism, what of Orthodoxy? Both have issues that may undermine their futures, too, especially fundamentalist Protestants, whose biblical literalism is indefensible. But those futures seem less clear to me than that of the Catholic church, which is losing its ability to dominate, to provide inflexible answers to questions that don't yield to simplicities.

I wish I could be here in 50 years to see if I have any of this right. But if I am right, I'd just wind up feeling overwhelming grief at all the pain that could have been avoided.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [4] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* *[5]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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