

Introduction

The following is the final chapter of my book – *The Catholic Church in the Third Millennium*. This chapter captures the theme of both the book and the web site. My intent in including it here is to establish a framework that may offer new perspectives as you read and reflect on some of the articles in this Library.

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Chapter Ten

The New Church In This New Millennium

We have processed the Vatican II changes and are in the threshold of a new millennium. The journey has been challenging and now, after more than four decades of reinvention and change, we seem to have settled into the routine of a new liturgy, new structures, new relationships, new roles and new responsibilities. Yet, we proposed that we have not yet reached our destination. Instead, we suggested that change and innovation in and of itself is not necessarily progress and that we as Church in this third millennium are still very much a work in process. There is still much more to accomplish.

Surveys report that average attendance at Sunday liturgies in most parishes in the United States ranges between twenty to thirty percent. Many Catholics listed in our parish directories do not attend Mass at all. And of those who do attend Sunday mass regularly, how many are involved in the parish's ministries? In diocesan ministries? In the ministries of other charitable organizations? "If progress is measured by results we are failing statistically.

Unhappily, a small number of Catholics have been attracted to other churches and have joined their congregations. Some of these churches are mainstream churches and some are non-denominational. Some are small while others are the newer, independent mega churches. Yet, there doesn't seem to be any sense of urgency. I hear no cause for alarm. There seems to be little or no outreach.

Complacency

Have we perhaps become complacent? The consequences of complacency are similar to that of a frog in a pan of water. If we were to place a frog in pan of cool water, the frog is energetic. On the other hand, if we were to heat the water gradually, we find that the frog will steadily reduce its activity. Eventually, the frog becomes complacent and remains unmoved even to the point when the water reaches its boiling point. Naturally, the frog dies.

The book of Revelation places a different spin on complacency as it pertains to our spirit. Revelation considers complacency of the spirit the enemy of change and transformation. "I know your works. I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I spit you out of my mouth."*

We as Church cannot be complacent. We cannot assume that everyone is excited about their faith. Rather we should develop a greater passion for our own faith and reach out to the disinterested and the disenfranchised.

We proposed that it is time to revisit and clarify our vision of the Church in this new millennium. A vision, once clearly defined and communicated, cultivates a fuller understanding of who we are as Church. A vision creates a passion and a necessity for change and gives birth to a new enthusiasm for living. In the absence of a vision, complacency begins to set in and, if not checked, the result is paralysis.

A New Paradigm

We commented that, during the years following Vatican II, we as Roman Catholics dwelled on rediscovering and reinventing ourselves as Church. Subsequently, we focused considerable attention on revising and refining our understanding of faith, church and sacraments. We altered our roles and relationships and gained a greater understanding and appreciation of community, spirituality and ministry.

We proposed that the Church experienced two major transformations in its history. Word and Evangelization characterized the Church in the first millennium. Sacraments and Worship characterized the Church in the second millennium. Each transformation was a *paradigm shift* – “a fundamental change from how we understood and previously viewed Church to a totally new and different view” of Church. Lastly, we proposed that we as Church in this third millennium are experiencing a new paradigm shift and that Spirituality and Ministry will characterize the Church in this third millennium. We suggested that this transformation will require a new and different understanding and view of Church, spirituality and ministry.

It is both interesting and possibly foretelling that the change Roman Catholics are experiencing as we enter this new millennium is not historically unique in our Church’s history. These changes may very well be an indication of other greater things to come, not only in the universal Catholic faith tradition, but possibly in other faith traditions as well. Other researchers have arrived at similar conclusions. For example, in her book *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle relates Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer’s observation that “...the only way to understand what is currently happening to us as twenty-first century Christians in North America is first to understand that about every five every hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale. We are living in one of those rummage sales in which empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time...must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”

Bishop Dyer goes on to explain. “First, a new and more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge. Second, the organized expression of Christianity, which up until then had been the dominant one, is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self...And the third result is of equal, if not greater significance...Every time the incrustations of Christianity have been broken, the faith has spread and been spread dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach as a result of unease and distress”.**

Some would interpret the Second Vatican Council as the Roman Catholic Church's rummage sale and that the changes we made have resulted in a more vital form of Roman Catholic Christianity. One would also pray that any unease and distress that we may experience would encourage a greater reconstitution of faith for all faith traditions so that together we can fulfill the vision of Jesus at His last supper, "...that they all may be one, as you, Father are in me and I in you, that they also maybe one in us."***

Our Journey Continues

We commented that some might feel that we the Catholic Church in America have already climbed the mountain and have arrived at our destination. However, we suggested that, even though we have journeyed a great distance, we cannot declare that we have arrived and that the opposite might be true. It may very well be that we as Church have not yet reached the peak and instead, we are still experiencing the challenge of innovation and change. We proposed that we are more likely very much a Church in transformation and it may be that we are simply resting as on a safe plateau just below the mountaintop, perhaps catching our breath and experiencing a sigh of relief as we prepare ourselves to make the final ascent.

We acknowledged that we as Church have made much progress. However, even though it may seem that all the pieces of the Church's puzzling future are in place, we cannot declare that we have completed our mission. Our journey continues. We have not as yet become the Church that we are intended to be in this third millennium. If this proposition has any merit, we must avoid falling into the proverbial "rut" – a casket with its two ends kicked out. Instead, it is time to rededicate ourselves and continue the ascent. Our only obstacles are humanity's worst enemies - apathy and malaise.

Change and Renewal

If we are to continue our ascent and accomplish our mission to become the Church we are intended to be in this third millennium, we must begin by questioning, "How are we doing as Church? Are we making changes sufficient enough to meet the challenges we are facing? Are we selling the good news of salvation properly?" We cannot simply pray and wait for things to happen. We must adapt a continuing attitude of change and renewal. Both the faithful and clergy together need to foster a greater enthusiasm for our faith, reenergize and challenge ourselves, be more proactive and make things happen.

Our message is simple. God became man in the person of Jesus. Jesus died for us. Jesus remains with us in the Eucharist, a spiritual and bodily holy communion of God and humanity. Jesus entrusted to us, His Church, the responsibility to continue His mission of salvation. By virtue of our Baptism, we are all called to live our lives as an "alter Christus", another Christ. For this reason, it seems only natural that we would ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?"

As we commented earlier, everyone is a participant and everyone is a leader. Baptized Catholic Christians may decide that it is now time to assume a greater leadership role both in our own lives and in the life of the Church. We must pull out all of the stops, muster all of our resources and make it possible for more people to participate actively in the Church's mission. We cannot hold back or be complacent. Catholicism can no longer be considered a spectator sport. Leadership in the Church is one of the most sacred of all trusts.

In order for us to make a transformation in this new millennium, we will want to insure that we direct the application of the Gospel message to our hearts and souls. We will want to excite the spirit, stimulate hope, inspire confidence, provide a path and offer solutions to the everyday, real world problems that people are experiencing. This may cause some to rethink their homilies, insure that we focus our message on real life applications and engender a greater sense of spirituality.

In order to fulfill our mission, we must cultivate a caring community of warmth and acceptance, engender a more evangelistic spirit about our faith experience and strive continuously for perfection. This will require us to make every effort to become the best at who we can be, work to be the best at what we do and, by our example, let our “light shine before all God’s people”.

Church – A Work In Process

We suggested that we as Church, the people of God, are still very much a work in process and that we should devote more attention on the basics - the essence of Church - spirituality, sacraments, ministry and the experience of true community. All the best coaches in all sports emphasize and stress the basics repeatedly. Casey Stengel, one of greatest major league managers in the history of baseball, attributed much of his success to mastering the basics. Casey began the first day of each spring training season by gathering his team around him. When Casey looked into their faces, he saw a group of men who were the best in the world in their sport. All of them had been World Series champions. Some were league leaders. Some were all stars. Several of them are now enshrined in the baseball hall of fame. Yet, Casey began each spring meeting by first lifting a baseball up high enough so all could see it. Then, once he had captured their undivided attention, he would proclaim, “Gentlemen, this is a baseball!”

Our earthly life is our spring training in preparation for the life to come and, like all the major leaguers and the all-stars in any sport, we are not made perfect in a day, a week, a season, a year or even a lifetime. We begin each day anew. Each day is the first day of the rest of our life. Therefore, we too must rededicate ourselves to mastering our basics – faith and spirituality, community and ministry. Otherwise, our potential is diminished, our progress is much slower and the results are less satisfying.

In his Gospel John affirms, “...God is *Love*”****, in Greek - *Agape*. Agape love is a sharing in the spiritual supernatural nature and the love of our all-loving God. Agape love is the essence of our being and a spiritual model for humanity. Agape is the love that God revealed to us in Jesus, the supreme model of love. We demonstrate God’s love in us by sharing that love unselfishly with others through ministry. Our ministry is a reflection of the love we share with God. Let us define our own lives and our ministry by agape – love itself.

A New Millennium. A New Church.

The Church’s mission to change in this new millennium is both daunting and challenging. The good news is that change is a natural part of the human condition. Our nature as spiritual human beings thrives on the challenge to change, to transform and seek new horizons. On the other hand, if the vision and the goals are unclear, we are less able to respond to the challenges that change presents. In the absence of a clearly defined vision,

we become complacent However, unlike the frog, complacency may not cause physical death. Much worse, complacency anesthetizes the human spirit, in which case we do not die physically. We die emotionally and spiritually.

The torch has been passed on to us, a new generation in the Church in this new millennium. This generation cannot simply perpetuate the status quo. We have not yet completed the transformation. We must avoid settling into a comfort zone. Let us live our lives as the body of Christ, both as individuals and as Church. Let us long to hear Jesus say to us what the Master said to the good servant, “Well done my good and faithful servant...Come, share your master’s joy.” May I add my peace and blessing to you, all those whom you love and all those who love you. May we all journey together in community as we become the Church we are to be -

“The New Church in this Third Millennium”!

- * Revelation 3:15-16
- ** *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle, Pages 16-17
- *** John 18:21
- **** 1 John 4:8