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How to find community in a church in schism

Brendan Walsh | Oct. 2, 2012
Viewpoint

It seems that the older I get, the more reflective I become. I tend to move slower but think deeper.

My wife, Willa, and I both turn 70 this year. Forty-four of those years have been with the Viva Catholic Worker house in Baltimore. We now have a clear understanding of what it means to do the works of mercy and resist the works of war. It seems we have done little to change the world, or the city of Baltimore, or even the neighborhood, but we believe that the world hasn?t changed us either, which is something positive.

Meanwhile, the soup pots and cases of canned goods feel heavier, while the lines for the kitchen and the pantry seem endless. Once Viva House served mostly older men with drug or drinking problems; now we see young families with children.

The house is a place of love in action, which is often ?harsh and dreadful,? yet it trumps any other way of living. We have tried to be faithful to Dorothy Day?s understanding of the need ?to bring beauty into the midst of ugliness.? Because, she believed, ?beauty honors and glorifies God. To see such beauty from the dung heap of a slum.?

Our lives have roots in the church -- baptism, Eucharist, schooling, convent and seminary. Sometimes the institutional church reflected beauty and truth, but increasingly the blind power and greed of the hierarchy tarnishes and even buries both.

The institutional church is in schism. It?s breaking apart. The issues are not trivial. They include issues of social justice (an overriding complicity of silence with regard to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, rendition, Guantanámo, drone attacks, and the dismantling of social programs that support the common good); gender and economic inequality; and a deep-rooted mistrust of and disdain for all the male powers at the top.

People see the wisdom of H.L. Mencken?s comment that ?an archbishop is a Christian ecclesiastic of a rank superior to that attained by Christ.? Clearly many of those who once occupied the pews have had it with clericalism, pomposity, aloofness, empty homilies and hypocrisy.

Additionally, more and more Catholics are appalled at the institution?s blatant maltreatment and contempt for U.S. women religious and for our gay sisters and brothers. The core of the Gospel is quite clear: We are all one, member for member. There is no justification for dividing people against each other because of gender, race, sexual preference or country of origin. Anyone who preaches or teaches these hatreds violates the two great commandments to love God and demonstrate that love with our neighbors every day.

My aunt Kitty was a Dominican nun of unquestionable integrity and insight. She was also a guardian of the correct usage of the English language. My sister Pat has been a Sister of Charity in New York City since her high school days. She taught elementary school students for decades and still serves her community today. So for me, the attack on the nuns is personal. My aunt and sister actually worked in the vineyard for years and

years. They didn?t accumulate property, wear miters on their heads or have anyone kiss their rings. They just did the work. For many Catholics, the sisters introduced us to social justice and the great commandment to love.

U.S. cardinals and bishops have the gall to call out the nuns and laity over issues like abortion and birth control while many of them have been hiding real evil. Between 1950 and 2002, there were more than 4,000 incidents of priests sexually abusing children. Thus far, U.S. dioceses have paid out well over $1 billion in lawsuits. These abuses are immoral and criminal. Repentance is what is needed, and apologies aplenty. And a redress of grievances. To paraphrase a quote from an episode of ?The Wire?: It seems as if the bishops would rather live in a garbage dump than let the world see them work a shovel.

We agree with Dorothy Day that the church, no matter how corrupt it may become, ?carries within itself the seeds of its own regeneration. ... It is the saints who keep appearing all through history who keep things going.?

Day referred to those people who don?t flinch or give up when confronted by what seems to be intractable power. They open their hearts and arms to everyone. They reject that worldly power, the accumulation of property and wealth, and abandon the use of violence and say so, even when it means enduring terrible suffering.

In the end, we still have the Sermon on the Mount, community and the opportunity to practice the command to love one another. We still believe that even when two or three people gather together in the search for community there is the presence of God. That?s what it?s all about.

[Brendan Walsh and his wife, Willa Bickham, cofounded Viva Catholic Worker House in Baltimore.]

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