Opinion
Spirituality
Guest Voices



The Carmo church and convent in Lisbon, Portugal, seen in 2006, are historic landmarks of buildings damaged in the Nov. 1, 1755, earthquake. (Wikimedia Commons/Esme Vos)



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As much of the ground crumbles beneath the churches, as sanctuaries close and members fade away, a recurring question occurs with greater urgency: Did Christianity lose its essential vitality when it won the world around it?

Both folklore and scholarship frame the early centuries of the church as a period of extraordinary courage and dedication in keeping alive a fledgling movement punished by Roman authority. Then, in 313, Constantine the emperor put the stamp of approval on the faith and it became a powerful partner in the empire. It remained a constitutive building block of the West until its embrace of modernity appears to have eroded it.

There isn't much open admission that this erosion is happening, only a well-meant somberness among churchgoers that things are not going their way. The churches fade from the public stage with little attention to this major shift by media or the church itself. Denial is both the understandable result of dismay and the sign of paralysis. Nobody, and I mean nobody, knows what to do to reverse direction. Evangelism, to all intents and purposes, has become a meaningless term. It's rare that one Christian tries to convert a non-believer. Among other things, the embedded American belief that everyone is entitled to their own beliefs inhibits such approaches. And, truth to tell, most Christians feel unprepared to make the case for the faith, feeling a lack of knowledge or a cluster of what they think of as unacceptable doubts.

In July, a new batch of Gallup polls documented the slide. Respect for religion has steeply declined as has confidence in clergy as confidants and trusted guides. With the exception of a scattering of high-energy, purpose-driven congregations that have found some growth in creative approaches that prove difficult to replicate, the vast array of congregations are gaining little if anything and gradually diminishing. Congregants are finding it harder to ignore but are increasingly perplexed. They continue worshipping the same God, support their beloved parish, attend the church suppers and hope for the best in the midst of an unspoken sunset of heritage.

A minister friend of mine believes an answer to this drain is to build "social fabric" on a wider scale as a means of spawning similar communities of faith. He writes a

column to promote that end in a weekly newspaper. His inspiration stems from reading *Bowling Alone*, a popular book that argues that personal ties to others were are being undermined by rampant drives toward privacy and isolation. My reading of the same book left me with a different conclusion, namely, that the forces of disintegration are so thoroughly entwined with the dominant cognitive, emotional and economic forces of our age that appear unfixable.

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But, of course, that judgment is laden with my inevitable flaws and misperceptions. That's the way it looks to this human being conditioned by his predilections and limitations. There's another stirring in me, a gift of faith that suspects that the shrinking — the seeming futility of the current withering — betokens birth pangs of another reformation that will recast the meaning of living the Gospel in a future world. The "earthen vessel," as St. Paul characterized the human container for carrying the message, might be undergoing a revamping to fit it for meeting vastly new needs, including a posture that will detach worldly baggage that has hampered its way and a renewed grasp of what it means to be "in the world but not of the world."

Churches have over the recent centuries taken on much secular learning and habits that have enhanced the scope of their ministry of justice and effected a cleansing of bias and superstition; they have also adopted traits and trends like personhood and self-gain that have weakened, even perverted Christian formation. Greed, materialism and self-centeredness come to mind. The churches' struggles at this time could become a staging ground for that new vessel. I'm guessing that the deck would be cleaned for the emergence of a global, essentially single church with various branches that attract seekers who find an appeal in a church that doesn't crave approval from the culture or that damns but respects it and offers its own breadth and depth of life and faith. A different kind of hope not dependent on societal success.

Not long ago, churches were chided for having an "edifice complex," an outsized attachment to sanctuaries that begged for architectural and cultural awards. Bigness and ostentation told the world that the churches belonged in the realm of makers and shakers. The American way was anchored to a model of "growth," the gross national product being the measure of national pride and health, "winning" in

everything from Olympics to Oscars the ends sought.

A Christianity aborning could be imagined as a modest partner in a larger, global community of religions, surrendering privilege and assumed primacy to humbling sharing of a commonly recognized mysticism.

For now, until and unless the time of any such great turn, churches have little to boast about and much to ponder. They are not shunned but overlooked; not discredited, nor often commended as founts of re-creation either. They are ebbing presences, suffering in myriad ways, sometimes unconsciously, but still keeping a flame alive and with it, a promise of salvation.

Recent popes, including Francis, have endorsed "small is better," urging the church to shed its worldly ways, its fancy duds and status-seeking luxuries in the interests of serving others. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI saw the downward church statistics and spoke approvingly of a smaller, more faithful church imbued with integrity. There is nothing inherently good about smallness; the reasons for being there are what count. If the cause is rooted in bitterness or fear, there is nothing to build on. Where a faithful remnant keeps vigil, however, the future is blessed even in the state of the unknown. It can gain the whole world by losing.

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