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Guided to the monastery for this reason

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From *Where I Stand*

If papal trips around the globe do anything at all, they attract crowds. Or they don't. So reporters routinely use the size of the crowds that turn out to see a visiting pope as a mark of the health and vibrancy of the church. Pope Benedict XVI's recent trip to Africa, for instance, measured in numbers and headlines, must surely signal the spiritual impact of the church as the world struggles to find a moral compass in an age riven by competing forces and values in contention.

In this celebrity and mega-event world, then, numbers count.

In fact, Catholicism has always been deeply mired in numbers: nine first Fridays, 15 decades of the rosary, 40 days of Lent, seven deadly sins, 12 gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Ten Commandments, three Persons in One God, the 12 days of Christmas, the 14 stations of the cross, the seven sacraments. The list marked the Christian life from womb to tomb, each element of it calling us more and more deeply into the rhythm of the faith, the mystical dimensions of the spiritual life, the memory of who and what we were called to be.

Numbers are obviously still important to the modern church -- but for a different reason. The numbers that marked the passage through the faith in the past have blurred a bit in our time. Unfortunately, new numbers have come to take their place.

What is worse, these more recent sets of numbers are more deadly, more ominous than the first. And yet, at least at this point, we have not begun to talk much about the contrast between the two and what both really mean to the future of the church.

The numbers that dominate the church in our day are institutional markers rather than devotional landmarks or spiritual ideals.

Rome, for instance, has launched a visitation of American women religious, at least partially, they say, out of concern for the declining number of vocations to the sisterhood. They do not, however, seem as inclined to address the rest of the numbers affecting the church in our time. Not to mention the conspicuous absence of women in the official roles of the church, and the impact that might also in fact be having on the number of women seeking church vocations in our time.

Numbers that are rising every day while we mourn the loss of the 'old church' may well be ringing alarm bells we prefer not to hear while we concentrate on why women are choosing other kinds of commitment rather than entering religious communities in our own time.

The number of priest vocations, for instance, declines daily in the United States. And across Europe, too. (**A Catholic Dark Age**)

A growing number of parishes are being closed in U.S. dioceses as parishes follow middle-class Catholics into the suburbs. As a result, inner-city facilities of earlier eras are becoming restaurants and museums rather than halfway houses or hospices. The moves are neat and efficient. However, they leave adrift behind them the kinds of whole populations upon which the church was built.

The increasing number of unchurched or lapsed Catholics in the United States -- called the most religious country on earth -- surely requires some kind of explanation. Catholic church population figures hold steady only because the number of immigrant Catholics, particularly Hispanics, masks the steady hemorrhage of traditional parish populations.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life now lists unaffiliated individuals as the fastest-growing demographic in the United States and nondenominational megachurches as the fastest-growing religious bodies in the United States. How do we account for the meteoric rise of some churches in what Rome sees as a very fractious society and the decline in church affiliation in our own? Surely, the Catholic church itself must take some responsibility for the steadily enlarging fissure between the institution and the faithful.

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While groups like Call to Action, Voice of the Faithful, Dignity, the Women's Ordination Conference and FutureChurch call for the opportunity to participate in the ministry of the church, ministers everywhere labor under the burden of decline and the distancing of the laity from parish structures for the sake of lay communities of their own.

The number of sex abusers in a celibate church has exposed the deeply human foundation of a church in which the clergy has long been presented to the public as a bit above the human.

The number of episcopal cover-ups that allowed sex abusers to go on functioning at the expense of Catholic children and families leaves a public less inclined to turn their own consciences over to institutions that are apparently having trouble monitoring their own.

At the same time, the number of church ministries being curtailed due to the number of diocesan bankruptcies now held in thrall by compensation payments to sex-abuse victims weakens the public presence of the church as well as its Gospel image and social effectiveness.

Point: The answer to the renewal of the church does not lie in one set of numbers, in one set of answers

from only one part of the church, but in many.

Doing more of the same -- and doing it bigger and better -- is always a quick-fix response to institutional decline. But it is, at best, a short-lived cure. In its attempt to regain control after the chaos of the Reformation, the church managed to stop time and halt renewal for over 400 years. Then, primitive communication systems conspired to separate and isolate the visionary elements of geographically disparate and far-flung populations.

But those days are gone forever. Now the Internet, blogs, VOIP, and social-networking sites are fertile spawning grounds for new ideas, for ideas we don't want to hear, for ideas that are continually disrupting the past, for thinking groups of Christians who are beginning to organize themselves.

Now the task is no longer to suppress dissent; it is to keep up with it, just in case, as the sixth-century Rule of Benedict says of visitors who point out difficult things to the community about itself, "God guided them to the monastery for this very reason."

In our time, people have been calling attention to these new kinds of numbers that have been urgently important to the church for decades. To all the numbers, not just to some of them. To this point, few of the numbers have even been publicly discussed, let alone conclusions drawn.

The real problem is that to examine these numbers honestly will take the whole church -- not just the clerical component of it -- looking at the whole picture and being open to all the answers.

There is no doubt that the number of religious is rising in Africa. But in Africa, the state of the church, the state of the society and the state of the Catholic population are very different realities from our own. Both African men and women, more like women and men in Europe and North America 150-250 years ago, identify with religious life there as a place of opportunity, a new and vibrant kind of society, not a shamed or peripheral one. But that can't last forever if nothing is done about what we already know to be unresolved.

From where I stand, it is clear that until we face the fact that it is what the church gives a people in terms of loving witness to the Gospel and life-giving service to the poor and suffering -- rather than what it demands of them in terms of numbers of laws, indulgences, medieval Mass forms, indexes, inquisitions and excommunications -- numbers of people will continue to distance themselves from it. And all the visitations in the world won't solve that.

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