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About that grieving church

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

Kubler-Ross's stages of grieving, admittedly overused and over-simplified at times, seem to apply well to what I've observed in some corners of the church in my recent travels. The language of grief and mourning is very close to the surface in all these matters of reorganization, parish closings, mergers and questions about what to do about ministry in an age of decreasing priests and nuns.

As Marti Jewell, director of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project put it, "As I listened to people from around the country, it is a grief that comes from change, whether you choose it or not.

"In a period of instability," she said, people seem to come up with two options: some want to go back to when it was stable, to the 1950s, or they are "open to the spirit and want to see where it goes."

As she expanded on that, it is clear that even that is too facile a dichotomy, because what kind of change occurs and whether it is imposed or chosen factors heavily into people's reactions.

What also occurred to me during the past several weeks of travel through two dioceses and a host of parishes, through conversations with people deeply involved in diocesan structure and those affected by chancery office decisions, is that there is an arbitrariness to Catholic life that adds immeasurably to the uncertainty of life within the church. I can only presume that the added uncertainty cranks up grieving.

And it's not just liberals, for instance, mourning the loss of a favorite church, who are affected. There are conservatives who have had their churches closed; traditionalists and nationality parish members whose congregations are too small to sustain.

What about the Latin Mass Chapel that this bishop approves? What happens if the next thinks it should go?

What about the bishop who oversees a realm that once was mighty and influential and now is shrinking under the weight of demographic changes and financial stress?

It's all loss, or possible loss, and it's either beyond anyone's control or ultimate power resides in a bishop or pastor.

What about the parish in Northern Jersey, revived during the last decade with a congregation in which most members are between 25 and 50? That's a demographic that most pastors would envy, but the pastor who drove the revival is being transferred and everyone is terrified that "the next guy" will end all of the programs and liturgies that make it what it is. The consensus around a table of parish members I spoke with was that the most frustrating element in it all is: "We have no say." It may be an unfounded fear, but it's fear nonetheless.

If such anecdotal material is at all accurate in fashioning a picture of Catholic life today it would be that life in the church is tenuous and arbitrary. Years of work can be undone in an instant by a new bishop or pastor. A trained lay minister working for church wages can be dismissed in an instant by a change of regime at any level.

Grief and a sense of arbitrariness ? and the fear that goes with it ? may among the most powerful, if deforming, elements of Catholic life today that remain largely unaddressed.

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