

Rethinking the Catholic 'box score'

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 20, 2009 All Things Catholic

Arguably the most influential sports book of the decade, and almost certainly the most controversial, was 2003's *Moneyball* by Michael Lewis. It exposed a dirty little secret that baseball's best minds already understood: the categories that shape judgments about the game are often badly flawed.

Box scores, for instance, prize hits and RBIs, but on-base percentage is actually a more telling index of a batter's value (because it also gauges the ability to draw walks.) Pitchers win awards for their earned run average, but that statistic also reflects the impact of defense, ballparks, and plain luck; the ratio of groundballs to fly balls, however, is something a pitcher can control, and it's certainly worth taking into consideration, since nobody ever smacked a ground ball into the upper deck. By considering such under-valued abilities, smart teams can acquire game-changing players on the cheap.

Moneyball's point wasn't that ERA or batting averages are irrelevant, of course, but rather that excessive focus on those categories fails to bring the whole game into view. The science of the whole game is known as Sabermetrics, for the Society for American Baseball Research, and its merit is beyond doubt: It helped the Oakland A's win more games than teams with three times their payroll in the early part of the decade and the Boston Red Sox to finally break their World Series jinx in 2004.

As I've observed before, Catholicism and baseball share a natural affinity. Both venerate the past, both spawn vast bodies of rules and lore, and both put a premium on patience. The analogy applies here too: In the church as on the diamond, flawed categories skew perceptions of the game.

A Catholic version of *Moneyball* might offer two challenges to the ecclesiastical box score:

- Thinking not just in local or national terms, but globally.
- Focusing not just on controversy, scandal, and newspaper headlines, but where ordinary Catholics actually invest their time and treasure.

Two stories this week illustrate each point.

In Mexico, the [country's bishops issued](#) [1]a *cri de Coeur* Nov. 12, in the wake of 14,000 violent deaths since a crackdown on drug cartels began in 2006: "To the producers, dealers, pushers and consumers, we say, 'Enough!' Stop hurting yourself, and stop causing so much damage and pain to our young people, to our families and to our country."

The bishops also apologized for "superficial evangelization," and what they euphemistically described as an "anti-witness from many of the baptized." That's an indirect way of admitting that in a country where 90 percent of the population is nominally Catholic, such carnage would be impossible if Catholics weren't complicit.

All this took some guts, since denouncing the drug trade can be hazardous to one's health. Fifteen Catholic

clergy have been murdered in Mexico since 1993, including a cardinal, eleven diocesan priests, and three religious. In 2008 alone, seven bishops and 120 priests received death threats, placing the priesthood alongside journalism and law enforcement as dangerous occupations. Most of these attacks remain unsolved, due to intimidation and corruption.

Mexico is the second-largest Catholic country on earth, and it's an example of realities across the developing world, where two-thirds of the 1.1 billion Catholics today live. This week's news illustrates three frequently under-appreciated points about the church:

- Catholics elsewhere usually don't spend much time on the debates that loom so large in Europe and the States, such as the Latin Mass or the power of the bishops. Given the challenges they're facing, such preoccupations often seem a luxury they can't afford.
- The most creative Catholic energies in the 21st century are likely to be *ad extra* rather than *ad intra*, concerned with changing the world rather than changing the church.
- The dominant Catholic social justice concern of the future is likely to be good governance and the fight against corruption. As a result, the "growth industry" in peace-and-justice ministry will likely be personal conversion, not just political advocacy.

The second story is even less likely to make waves, but it's equally revealing: From Nov. 19 -21, the Vatican is holding a first-ever conference on ministry to the deaf. The event was presented by the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care, and organized by groups such as the International Catholic Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons and an Italian religious order called "The Little Mission for the Deaf."

On Tuesday, Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, President of the Pontifical Council, estimated that there are 1.3 million deaf Catholics around the world -- many of whom, he admitted, struggle to "participate fully" in the church, "with consequent obstacles to their possibilities for spiritual growth and religious practice." That marginalization, Zimowski said, represents "a loss of their contribution to the vitality and riches of the church."

Ministry to the deaf is a relatively new pastoral category, and it's emerged as creative impulses usually do, from ordinary Catholics seeing a need and trying to meet it. Officialdom is simply ratifying something already bubbling at the grassroots.

If you want a measure of how over-emphasis on a limited set of categories distorts perceptions, consider this: Barrels of ink have been spilled dissecting the Vatican's outreach to disgruntled Anglicans, which, realistically, might bring a few thousand new members into the church worldwide. Here you have an effort to integrate 1.3 million folks more thoroughly into the church, and it flies below radar -- because, of course, ministry to the deaf doesn't open a new front in the culture wars, which is a category we in the West take very seriously indeed.

This week's conference also helps account for something that otherwise can seem inexplicable: Why so many Catholics remain basically bullish about the church, despite all the scandal, division, and disappointment. Such Catholics aren't in denial, but their energy is invested in trying to do something positive.

When hope is what gets you out of bed in the morning, the landscape almost always looks more promising. In parishes, lay movements, schools, and other Catholic venues all over the world, that's still the case, even if it rarely attracts much notice.

Perhaps all this could be the basis of a new "box score" for the church, meaning a better set of categories for thinking about what really matters. If Sabermetrics can help the Red Sox break the Bambino's curse (and I say this as a diehard Yankees fan), its potential for generating winning strategies in Catholic life may well be almost unlimited.

[John L. Allen is *NCR* senior correspondent. He can be reached at jallen@ncronline.org.]

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