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American Catholic demographics and the future of ministry

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Earlier this week I was in Chicago to keynote the annual conference of the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators, which is composed of folks struggling to help the church integrate contemporary best practices in human resources and business management. It's largely unheralded work, but critical if the Catholic church is to avoid the administrative meltdowns that too often mar its public image and impair its moral authority.

I was asked to talk about American Catholic demographics and what they suggest about the future of ministry. Though none of what I had to say constitutes news, sometimes it's useful to step back and focus on the forest rather than its individual trees.

Journalists are, of course, famous for bringing bad news. As the old joke goes, the nightly news is the program where they begin by saying "good evening," and then proceed to explain why it's really not. That's not my intent here. The trends outlined below suggest challenges and headaches aplenty, but they're also rich with potential for creative new energies in the American church, depending on how they play out.

The Ministers

First, the ministers of the future in America will be increasingly global. Already, one-sixth of the roughly 40,000 priests serving in the United States are from abroad, and the American church adds about 300 new international priests every year. Increasingly, the pastoral work of the church in this country is dependent upon these foreign priests. An official of the Chicago archdiocese, for example, said during the NACPA conference that there would be no priests doing sacramental ministry in Catholic hospitals in Chicago

were it not for the "externs," meaning priests from abroad on temporary assignment. The same basic trend holds in religious orders, in graduate programs of theology, and in various lay ministries in the church -- a greater share of Catholics doing ministry in America will be from abroad, reflecting the vitality of the faith in places such as sub-Saharan Africa and southeast Asia.

Second, future ministers will be increasingly laity. At present, there are slightly more than 40,000 priests in the United States and 31,000 "lay ecclesial ministers," meaning laity working full-time or part-time for the church performing ministries once done by priests or religious: music ministry, liturgy, CCD, RCIA, and so on. At the moment, there are 5,500 seminarians in America but an estimated 18,000 women and men preparing to be lay ecclesial ministers, so by 2020 or so the corps of professional lay ministers will exceed the number of priests. The growth in lay ecclesial ministry is the "tip of the spear," symbolizing a broader expansion of lay roles that includes the growth of new movements, the expansion of lay volunteer and missionary programs, the emergence of parish and diocesan councils and review boards, and the informal phenomenon of "guerilla evangelists" -- laity not waiting for any formal invitation or permission, but simply deciding to plant the flag for the faith in some sphere of life. This is a critically important transition, because if the church does not come to see laity as the primary front-line carriers of much of its ministry, it will be locked in an "arms race" it is destined to lose. Under any conceivable future scenario, Catholicism will not turn out enough priests to compete on a level playing field with, say, Pentecostal ministers, especially in Latino/a communities, or for that matter with the apostles of secularism in 21st century America.

Third, the ministers of the Catholic future will be increasingly "evangelical." The broad mass of twenty- and thirty-something Catholics today may be thoroughly secularized, but there is an inner core of faithful and practicing young Catholics who are the ones most likely to pursue a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, or to be most interested in making a career in the church as a lay person. The future leaders of Catholicism in America will come from this inner core. By now there's a considerable body of data about these "millennial Catholics," and the consistent finding is that they're more traditional in their attitudes and practices than the "Vatican II" generation they're replacing. These younger Catholics are attracted to traditional spiritual practices such as Eucharistic adoration and Marian piety; they have a generally positive attitude towards authority, especially the papacy; and they're less inclined to be critical of church teaching. I use the word "evangelical" rather than "conservative" to describe all this, in part because most experts say it's not really about the politics of left vs. right so much as generational dynamics. These young Catholics came of age in a rootless secular world, and are hungry for a clear sense of identity. More and more, the church's ministerial workforce will be stamped by this evangelical ethos.

The Ministered-To

First, the Catholic population of the future in the United States, like the country as a whole, will be older. The most rapidly growing demographic sub-segment of the American population is actually not immigrants, legal or undocumented, but the elderly. In 2005, there were 34.7 million Americans who were 65 and above; by 2050, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that number will 75.9 million, meaning the 65+ population will more than double within a half-century. Catholics in the United States are actually slighter younger than the general population, because of the lower average age among Hispanics and their higher-than-average birth rates, but nonetheless the Catholic population is also graying. By 2030, the Catholic church in America will have an additional 6.8 million members over the age of 65. While this "gray wave" poses many challenges, both for the society and for the church, it also hints at opportunity. Sociologists report that someone who's marginally religious at 35 will become progressively more religious as they age, so that the 65+ population represents that slice of the demographic pie most inclined to practice their faith, and most willing to devote their time and treasure to religious causes. If Catholicism in America can shape elder-friendly communities, it could therefore be on the brink of a

?boom market.?

Second, the church in this country will increasingly be blue collar and ethnic. According to the most Pew Forum study on religion in America, by 2030 whites will no longer be a statistical majority among American Catholics. Whites will represent 48 percent of the Catholic population, with Hispanics at 41 percent, Asian-Americans at 7.5, and Africans and African-Americans at 3. Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum, calls this the ?browning? of the Catholic church in America. Lugo notes that as Catholicism browns, it also becomes poorer. Hispanic immigrants are seven times less likely than whites to have completed high school, and two and one-half times more likely to earn less than \$30,000 a year. They're proportionately more likely to be under-insured or uninsured. Given these demographics, Catholicism in America in the 21st century will become an increasingly ?blue collar? faith. In some ways, this is taking the Catholic church in America back to the situation it faced in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when its demographic base was composed of successive waves of European immigration clustered in mostly blue-collar occupations and neighborhoods.

Third, the church in America will be increasingly ?tribalized.? The persistent divisions in American Catholicism are often referred to as ?polarization,? but the fault line between left and right is hardly the only one that matters. The Catholic landscape in America is dotted with various tribes: pro-life Catholics, liturgical traditionalists, the various movements, church reform Catholics, peace-and-justice groups, and so on. In principle that diversity is an asset, but in practice sometimes these tribes see themselves as rivals rather than allies, and hence the church becomes bogged down by internal conflict. (It's the tribalism of the Balkans, in other words, not the Iroquois Confederacy.) This reality reflects a broad tendency in American culture over the last forty years, documented in Bill Bishop's book *The Big Sort*, for Americans to retreat into physical and virtual ?gated communities.? Increasingly, many Americans -- including American Catholics -- prefer to rub shoulders only with people who already share their values, worldview, and political and theological beliefs. In turn, the clustering of the like-minded produces an echo chamber effect. Positions become more extreme, and people who don't share those positions seem increasingly alien and dangerous. The political climate in early 2010 doesn't offer much reason to believe this tribalism is likely to abate soon.

The Future

Advertisement

During Q&A, one sharp administrator told me he's always skeptical about straight-line projections, which assume that the future will be like the present. What about some ?wild card? factor, he asked, which would scramble the picture in unpredictable fashion -- in the way that 9/11 recalibrated American foreign policy?

The question is obviously a good one, but unfortunately it's fairly useless analytically. ?Stay loose? is always good advice, but not really a basis for allocating resources or setting priorities.

In any event, one could argue that the most important wild card in terms of how these six trends will develop isn't a possible bolt from the blue like Hurricane Katrina, but rather the choices American Catholics will make. How these six forces affect Catholic fortunes, in other words, is likely to rest in the first place on how we react to them.

For example, will the rising tide of evangelical energy among young ministers fuel tribalization in the church? Will it shade off into a sort of ?ghetto Catholicism,? effectively disengaged from the broader

culture? Or, will it revive important markers of Catholic identity, recharging the church's batteries to offer a distinctive contribution to the challenges of the 20th century?

Which way that goes will depend to a great extent on how the rest of the church reacts. In particular, will older Catholics artificially force the up-and-coming generation to take sides in the church's culture wars? Or, will we allow younger Catholics to be themselves -- finding their own mistakes to make, rather than repeating ours?

Similarly, the growing presence of international priests and other ministers from abroad could open up the American church to what it means to be Catholic in other parts of the world. It could also deepen existing tensions among priests, or between priests and people. Once again, the outcome will ride in large part on the choices Catholics make in parishes, dioceses, and other venues across the country -- how open or closed, flexible or rigid, they decide to be.

The great unknown isn't so much what might drop from the Heavens, but how American Catholics will respond to the realities already facing them. The future, in other words, depends not so much on our stars, but on ourselves.

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My Q&A sessions and informal chats with people at the conference reflected conversations I've had with Catholics all over the world during the last couple of months, in that the sexual abuse crisis, for obvious reasons, figured prominently. In general, two points loomed especially large in terms of what Catholics seem to be feeling.

First, people who have followed the story of the crisis for the last decade are genuinely astonished that Pope Benedict XVI has come to be seen as its symbol, since they know he's the senior Vatican official who has done more than anyone else to weed out abuser priests and to acknowledge the suffering of victims. In some cases that's fueling resentment and suspiciousness of the media, while in others it's seen more as a problem of communications and the legendary inscrutability of the Vatican. In any event, there is a tangible sense of frustration that any other storyline about Pope Benedict -- the positive teaching in his three encyclicals, or his strong environmental advocacy, or his efforts to engage the worlds of secular science and philosophy -- has been buried under an avalanche of crisis.

Second, there is a widespread sentiment that the public relations approach of the Vatican doesn't seem to be helping. Based on the reactions they've picked up in their workplaces, families, and neighborhoods, these Catholics were reporting that blaming the media, and comparing the attacks on the pope to anti-Semitism or to "petty gossip," have fueled public impressions that the church is in denial. Given that the folks at NACPA often have backgrounds in corporate management, several asked me why the Vatican doesn't bring in a team of faithful lay Catholics with communications expertise to give them advice. Of course, there's a truckload of reasons why it's difficult to put together a coordinated communications strategy in the Holy See, not the least of which is that it's a far more decentralized and loosey-goosey environment than people imagine. That said, my experience at NACPA and elsewhere suggests there's a vast reservoir of Catholics who would dearly love to offer their professional skills to help the Vatican out -- if only someone would ask.

[John Allen is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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