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The coming American schism

Phyllis Zagano | Jul. 20, 2011 Just Catholic

Maybe because it is summer and tempers tend to flare along with the temperature, there is a lot of anger in blog posts and Twitter feeds about the land. The church's social media blood pressure seems very, very high.

There is a fist fight on between the Ultra-Left and an Ultra-Right.

Will the Center hold?

Maybe not.

I fear that if an organizational genius comes along to connect the large glowing dots across the internet, we'll see a full blown schism sooner rather than later. The only question is who will join with whom?

Schisms come in two basic flavors: juridical and theological. When it comes to ignoring bishops? juridical authority, the signs are already there.

In Cleveland, St. Peter's Church folks formed the Community of St. Peter in defiance of their bishop, Richard Lennon. The bishop is now under Vatican investigation apparently at the request of a group called "Endangered Catholics." Years earlier in St. Louis, parishioners of St. Stanislaus Kosta Church defied orders to close and hired their own priest rather than turn over their endowment to the archbishop.

Angry theological debate abounds. Homosexuality is the topic du jour, but even moderate academic work gets dragged into the fray: witness the high profile attack on Elizabeth Johnson on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the resulting push-back by professional theologians and her religious community.

The electronic prize fight now under way is a blend of the juridical and the theological. If we take Catholic teaching as the middle ground, admitting there are a few things that could do with a tug to the left or to the right, it is easy to see this fight is going to go on for a very long time.

The camps (and camp followers) are in their respective corners. The beleaguered bishops are both time keepers and referees. Outside the online ring awaits a collection of Catholic-sounding groups ready to catch anyone who falls between the ropes or runs out of the audience.

In the Right corner, the "orthodox" crowd is coached by EWTN, *The Wanderer*, and the Catholic News Agency. Their cheering squad is led by folks like Bill Donohue at the Catholic League, the mysterious "Father Z", and other angry righteous bloggers too numerous to mention. (Father Z calls this newspaper "National Catholic Fishwrap.") They have a lot of money.

Warming up in the Left corner are the folks who oppose just about anything the bishops say, especially about homosexuality, embryonic stem cell research, and abortion -- while following this newspaper only insofar as it will scratch their itching ears. Their coaches -- depending on their individual issues -- are at Call to Action,

Catholic Democrats, and Catholics for Choice. Their cheering squad is a collection of Facebook and Twitter pros. They seem to have a lot of money, too.

Anyone with a ringside seat can see the blood, sweat and tears. But too close a view obscures the big picture and ignores what is happening outside the arena. Chicken Little has already spoken and gotten out of town.

Think of it: there are lots of "Catholic" groupings operating in the United States -- some small, some large, with clergy, chapels, followers and collection baskets.

To name a few: The American Catholic Church in the United States (Sedona, Arizona); American Catholic Church (Los Angeles); The Reformed Catholic Church (Toledo, Ohio); and the Anglo-Lutheran Catholic Church (Kansas City, Missouri). The Catholic Apostolic Church in North America, the international Society of Saint Pius X, and Roman Catholic Womenpriests have parishes across the land. They are Left and they are Right, but they are nowhere near the Center. All claim various degrees of apostolic succession.

As the Left-Right Catholic fight goes on, there seems no obvious contender among these disparate groups, and the large majority of people are increasingly bored, not to mention disgusted by the daily pedophilia report. They'll soon be leaving.

For what?

The problem with the splinter groups and their amalgamated clergy -- no matter what they proclaim -- is that they have ended (or never had) communion with the church. Every single Catholic who joins with them changes what the rest belong to.

The Catholic Church is not "Left" enough for some, but when they leave it, the barque of Peter lists even more to the Right. The church is not "Right" enough for others, so they jump out and that same barque lists to the Left. Even folks not in the fight are getting a little seasick.

Meanwhile, back in the arena the real fight is far from over, but people Left and Right are heading for the door.

I do not know the answer, or what will stop the fracas, except that maybe somebody should go out into the parking lot and put "WWJD" bumper stickers on all the cars before they speed away.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic Studies. Her latest book is *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan)]

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