

Three myths about the church to give up for Lent

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 2, 2012 All Things Catholic

I realize this comes a little late, but if anybody's still on the market for something to give up for Lent, I'd suggest that the following misconceptions about the Catholic church and about Christianity in general would be dandy bits of intellectual junk to cut loose in the spirit of the season.

Naturally, the venues where these three myths tend to be most deeply entrenched -- the secular media, the academy, political circles and so on -- are also places where the whole idea of Lenten sacrifice is sometimes a nonstarter. Yet they're remarkably widespread inside the church too, among people who really ought to know better. If Catholics perpetuate these ideas, it's hard to fault the outside world for being seduced by them.

Here are three popular fallacies, in the hope that Lent 2012 might mark the beginning of their expiration date.

1. Purple ecclesiology

"Purple ecclesiology" refers to the notion that the lead actors in the Catholic drama are the clergy, and in fact, the only activity that really counts as "Catholic" at all is that carried out by the church's clerical caste, especially its bishops. You can always spot purple ecclesiology at work when you hear someone say "the church" when what they really mean is "the hierarchy."

(I was once called by a producer from the BBC looking for leads on a segment they wanted to do about women in the Catholic church. I ticked off a series of high-profile Catholic laywomen they could ring up, to which the producer replied: "I'm sorry, I need someone from the church." She meant, of course, someone in a Roman collar -- that's purple ecclesiology at work.)

The truth is that the number of ordained clergy in the Catholic church comes to roughly .04 percent of the total Catholic population of 1.2 billion. If they're the main act, then all one can say is that the Catholic show is wildly top-heavy with supporting cast.

The self-parodying nature of purple ecclesiology was once memorably captured by Cardinal John Henry Newman, who, asked for his opinion on the laity, replied, "Well, we'd look awfully silly without them."

Seeing the church through a purple filter is misleading, even if all we take into view is the visible, institutional dimension of Catholic life. Most Catholic schools, hospitals, social service centers, movements and associations, even chanceries and parish headquarters, are staffed overwhelmingly by laywomen and men. More deeply, however, the church doesn't exist for itself, but to change the world, which means that if its message is to penetrate the various realms of culture -- medicine, law, the academy, politics, the economy and so on -- it's either going to be carried there by laity, or not at all.

Abandoning purple ecclesiology enables a wider focus on what the Catholic story of our time actually is. That story is not limited to whatever statement the U.S. bishops have made this week on insurance mandates or the latest Vatican pronouncement on liturgical practice, however important such developments may be. The full

Catholic story also includes what hundreds of millions of laywomen and men are doing in their own lives and in their circles of influence, motivated by their faith.

Among other things, a purple ecclesiology leaves one ill-equipped to see creative change taking shape in the church. Even a rudimentary grasp of church history is enough to conclude that such change rarely comes from the top down.

Catholicism developed the mendicant orders, for instance, not because a pope decreed that it should be so, but because creative individuals such as Dominic and Francis saw a new world being born in the great cities of Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries and developed new apostolic models to evangelize it. Catholicism gave birth to the great lay movements of the 20th century, such as L'Arche, Communion and Liberation, Schönstatt and Sant'Egidio, in precisely the same fashion -- bottom-up.

Any take on Catholicism in the 21st century that doesn't include the Focolare along with the bishops, or the Catholic Voices project and the Salt and Light network along with the Vatican, or the great rise of lay ministry in addition to the College of Cardinals, simply isn't seeing the whole picture.

If you don't get that, then you don't really get the church.

2. A church in decline

The popular take on Catholicism these days tends to be that it's a church in crisis. Rocked by sex scandals, bruising political fights and financial shortfalls, it seems to be hemorrhaging members -- a recent Pew Forum study found there are now 22 million ex-Catholics in America, which would be the country's second-largest religious body after what's left of the Catholic church itself -- as well as clustering parishes, closing institutions and struggling to hand on the faith to the next generation.

The overall perception is that this is an era of Catholic entropy -- decline, contraction, things getting smaller.

Seen from global perspective, however, that's just wildly wrong. The last half-century witnessed the greatest period of missionary expansion in the 2,000-year history of Catholicism, fueled by explosive growth in the southern hemisphere. Take sub-Saharan Africa as a case in point: The Catholic population at the dawn of the 20th century was 1.9 million, while by the end of the century it was more than 130 million, representing a staggering growth rate of 6,708 percent. Overall, the global Catholic footprint shot up from 266 million in 1900 to 1.1 billion in 2000, ahead of the overall rate of increase in world population, and is still rising today.

The dominant Catholic narrative of our time, in other words, is not decline but astronomic growth. (That's not true everywhere, as there are significant losses in Europe, parts of North America and in some pockets of Latin America, but it is the global big picture.)

Running those numbers, one is reminded of a famous 2003 essay by David Brooks, poking fun at secular elites who like to believe that religion is in decline: "A great Niagara of religious fervor is cascading down around them," he wrote, "while they stand obtuse and dry in the little cave of their own parochialism."

Even in the United States, the Catholic church is actually holding its own. Yes, it's lost a third of Americans born into the faith, but its retention rate of two-thirds is actually fairly healthy by the competitive standards of America's wide-open religious marketplace. (It's much higher than, say, the Jehovah's Witnesses, who retain only one-third of their members.) Further, the Catholic church is holding steady at roughly a quarter of the national population, thanks largely to Hispanic immigration and higher-than-average birth rates among Hispanic Catholics. In the words of Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum, American Catholicism is "browning," but it's not contracting.

To be sure, statistics alone don't settle disputes about the choices facing the church. Those 22 million ex-Catholics in America, for instance, don't necessarily represent a "vote with your feet" referendum against the conservative drift of church leadership in the last quarter-century, especially when you consider that, according to the Pew data, a sizeable chunk defected to Evangelical Protestantism. Nor does the phenomenal growth of Catholicism in the global south necessarily amount to an endorsement of current Vatican policy, because quite honestly, the Vatican has had precious little to do with it.

In other words, you can't draw a straight line from population data to who's right or wrong in current Catholic debates. What can be said with empirical certainty, however, is that anybody who thinks this is an era of Catholic decline needs to get out more often.

3. Christianity is the oppressor, not the oppressed

Of all the popular misconceptions about Catholicism, and about Christianity in general, this is arguably the most pernicious.

Stoked by historical images of the Crusades and the Inquisition, and even by current perceptions of the wealth and power of church leaders and institutions, it's tough for Western observers to wrap their minds around the fact that in a growing number of global hotspots, Christians today are the defenseless oppressed, not the arrogant oppressors.

Here's the stark reality of our times: In the early 21st century, we are witnessing the rise of a whole new generation of Christian martyrs.

Christians are today, statistically speaking, by far the most persecuted religious group on the planet. According to the Frankfurt-based Society for Human Rights, fully 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed against Christians. The Pew Forum estimates that Christians experience persecution in a staggering total of 133 nations, fully two-thirds of all the countries on earth.

As part of that picture, the Catholic relief agency "Aid to the Church in Need" estimates that 150,000 Christians die for their faith every year, in locales ranging from the Middle East to Southeast Asia to sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Latin America. This means that every hour of every day, roughly 17 Christians are killed somewhere in the world, either out of hatred for the faith or hatred for the works of charity and justice their faith compels them to perform.

Perhaps the emblematic example is Iraq, where a strong Christian community that took two millennia to build has been gutted in the arc of a little more than two decades. Prior to 1991, the year of the First Gulf War, there were more than 2 million Christians in Iraq, while today the high-end estimate is that somewhere between 250,000 and 400,000 may be left.

Given the special responsibility the United States bears for Iraq, the fact that the fate of Iraqi Christians is not a driving, front-burner priority in American Catholic life is nothing short of a moral outrage.

As the U.S. bishops gear up to fight a new set of church/state battles on the domestic front, the foregoing suggests a special challenge to American Catholics to keep our eyes on the prize. In the States, a threat to religious freedom usually means you might get sued, while in many parts of the world, it means you might get shot. Surely we can all agree that's a more dramatic set of circumstances.

If you give up anything this Lent, the inability to recognize a growing global war on Christians would be a truly inspired choice.

In the latest round of the Vatican leaks scandal, an Italian newspaper on Wednesday published two confidential letters documenting a failed 2011 effort by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's powerful Secretary of State, to take control of an important Italian Catholic university and hospital system.

[Read more here](#) [1].

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