

Shuttering of Philadelphia newspaper inspires nostalgia for how things were

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Archdiocese lays out broad changes in administration; newspaper among offices to close or merge

COMMENTARY

I was working on an essay on the state of things ecclesiastical as we approach the Fortnight for Freedom when a long-ago colleague emailed a link to a story by Philadelphia *Inquirer* writer David O'Reilly reporting that a projected deficit of \$17 million in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia has forced Archbishop Charles J. Chaput to announce "a massive restructuring that will include the immediate closure of the archdiocesan youth office and the monthly newspaper," *The Catholic Standard & Times*.

My reporting of recent years has led me to conclude (repeatedly and also -- some unabashed self-promotion here -- in my book, *The Emerging Catholic Church*) that the church has changed significantly in the last 50 years and that it will keep changing by dint of new theological and scientific insights and by force of sheer demographic changes. Although some people are loudly insisting that it hasn't really changed and shouldn't change any more.

Important to all of that changing -- but not essential to it, at least at the starting point of the Second Vatican Council -- is the priest sex abuse scandal, which actually is primarily a scandal of hierarchical cover-up.

In short, we who have stuck with it over the last five decades are in the midst of a real swirl these days. At times, everything feels contentious and unsettled. Bishops are defensive; priests feel abandoned; laypeople are whipsawed between the poles of "please come back, we love you" and "if you don't like the rules, get out." Somehow in all of the crud emanating from the male sex abuse matter, the nuns have become the problem, the real source of scandal within the church. So now we've got nuns on a bus with talking points that essentially say, "We're not the problem." Even those of us who welcomed much of the change and who anticipate more yearn for the calm of yesteryear.

And then, whomp! Another notice that more anchors have been pulled up on the local Barque of Peter.

Full nostalgia confession here: I grew up on the northwestern edge of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. In seventh grade, I earned a trip to Washington, D.C., with my teacher, Sr. Myra, because I sold the most subscriptions to *The Standard and Times*, which was then a weekly. (Fuller disclosure: It wasn't too difficult because I lived in a large extended Italian Catholic family, and even a 12-year-old could guilt a recalcitrant uncle or two into "supporting the church.")

It gets deeper. I didn't take the D.C. trip because it fell on the same day as Confirmation and as an acolyte I had the opportunity to serve, and the celebrant was Archbishop Cardinal John Krol. In my imagination at the time, he was a larger-than-life figure. All cardinals were. And I would get to meet him. I did. It was nice. Not life-changing. I should have taken the trip to D.C.

Some years later -- and this is the fullest disclosure I've ever made publicly about my earliest brushes with Catholic identity -- I was elected president of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia CYO. No kidding. I have no idea how or why.

I really didn't know what I was doing as president of the CYO. But we were all teenagers. I suppose no one else really knew what they were doing, either. We had very helpful adult advisors.

I remember a priest, in an effort to help, gave me a copy of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. I probably should re-read it.

Someone suggested that I run after I met a bunch of kids from Philly at a CYO convention in New York in November 1963. It was a convention visited by President John F. Kennedy. I just found the date, Nov. 15, and his remarks online. (Talk about how things change.)

His remarks began with a little joke: "I am glad to be here today. I said to the Monsignor coming up that I was pleased to see the Sisters, that in my experience Monsignors and Bishops are all Republicans while Sisters are all Democrats!" (How much things remain the same.)

A week later, I was sitting in Sr. Davidica's Latin class at St. Pius X High School when the voice of the principal, Fr. Francis X. Kimble, came over the intercom to tell us that the president had been shot.

What I remember most about that year was a convention at the start at some parish where I had to give a speech, and then there was a vote. I think it was all rigged by the prior administration. What I next remember is that I spent a lot of time getting lost. I have no sense of direction. It was something I didn't realize then as a problem -- I just got lost, as if it were the normal thing to do -- and probably wouldn't have admitted at the time. I had to drive about an hour from Pottstown to get to Philadelphia, to 1819 Arch St., to be precise. I mostly drove an old Oldsmobile, a tank of a car, and I ended up meeting a lot of people for a moment or two while asking directions. Actually, as I remember it, I eventually got very good at getting to 1819 Arch St. I just always had trouble getting back onto the Schuylkill Expressway going the right way. The real nightmare came when I had to go somewhere new in Philly. That meant using a map. I love maps today; I just find it impossible to use them while driving. By the end of my year-long term I had driven through a great many Philadelphia neighborhoods. I now love my GPS.

I don't know if today there are youngsters nominally leading the CYO of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, or if such an organization even exists. The O'Reilly story says CYO sports programs and such will continue "virtually unchanged" but that they will be run out of the Office of Education.

However it works, I am always a bit sad thinking of Catholic kids of today. How does anyone explain the headlines to a youngster? How do you explain priests doing such horrible things? How do you explain bishops and cardinals, for God's sake, covering up the ugly truth for decades on end? How do you deal with such deep betrayal and yet say, "This is the community you belong to, this is the community that you should stick with"?

I don't have an easy, ready answer. And for as much as I might disagree with some of Archbishop Chaput's analysis (for what it's worth, I agree with a good portion of a speech he recently gave -- more of that in the essay that was interrupted by this news) I feel a great deal of sympathy for what he faces in Philadelphia. I've read the grand jury reports and more, I know a bit about the deeply entrenched clerical culture in that archdiocese, and I wouldn't wish the job of trying to set things right in that place on anyone.

I have the luxury of looking back through selective memory and imagining a time of calm and predictability in the church. I can fool myself into hazy, smile-filled recollections, but only for a time. Eventually the understanding intrudes: There was so much that was wrong and hidden. So much deception necessary in order to keep appearances.

During those same high school years, so many reasons existed for the bishops of the world to gather in Rome and begin the long process of moving toward the questions of the 21st century. Answering them is turning out to be a process taking place on a long trajectory. This is, after all, an institution that moves at a millennial pace. And too often along the way, we insist on using outdated maps.

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