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The expansion of Catholicism in the South

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

When I give talks in Europe or North America, I usually get some version of the following question: "What are the church's plans for dealing with the priest shortage, or the decline in vocations to the religious life, or dwindling Mass attendance rates, or the problem of transmitting the faith to the next generation?"

The premise is usually that the church is in a crisis, one serious enough to provoke a re-examination of current doctrines or disciplines.

While there's perfectly legitimate debate to be had on each of these questions, the underlying assumption of decline reveals a particularly Western focus. The reality is that worldwide, these are boom times for Catholicism, not bust.

The numbers are indisputable.

In 1900, at the dawn of the 20th century, there were 459 million Catholics in the world, of whom 392 million were found in Europe and North America, and just 67 million scattered across the rest of the planet, principally in Latin America.

In

2000, there were 1.1 billion Catholics in the world, with 380 million in Europe and North America, and almost 800 million in the global South. Roughly half of the Catholics in the world today live in Latin America alone. Given demographic and religious trends, this population realignment in global Christianity will continue. By 2025, only one Catholic in five in the world will be a non-Hispanic Caucasian.

Population growth explains some, but not all, of this expansion. The last half-century has also witnessed a striking wave of adult conversions to Christianity, especially in Africa.

Between 1970 and 1985, to take just one index, some 4,300 people a day were leaving Christian churches in Europe and North America. Over the same period, there were 16,500 conversions to Christianity a day in Africa, yielding an annual growth of some 6 million new African Christians. In Roman Catholicism, more than half of all adult baptisms in the world, generally considered the most reliable indication of conversions, are in Africa alone.

Moreover, the new growth in Africa and Asia, and to some extent in Latin America, is not merely replicating pre-existing European patterns of faith and practice. Instead, it's creating myriad new forms of Christianity as the faith mingles with indigenous customs and concepts. Experts have described this as the most important cultural transformation in Christianity since the period of Hellenization launched by St. Paul.

In other words, the central challenge for world Catholicism at the moment is not decline, but growth, and making sense of the new interactions between faith and culture this growth is generating.

"Rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic" has passed into the cultural idiom as a synonym for blithe indifference to an underlying crisis. I would suggest that much conversation in Western Catholicism these days is more akin to arguing over which buggy whips are best, while ignoring the emergence of the car; that is, a completely new world is taking shape, one destined to render many of this era's debates obsolete.

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What I have called the "upside down church" of the future, one driven increasingly by the experience and priorities of the South, is likely to take scant interest in matters that have set the Catholic agenda in the West for more than a century, such as the balance of power between Rome and the bishops, or debates over various questions of doctrine. Instead, it will be the "cash value" of Catholicism in the confrontation with poverty, disease, corruption, war and cultural conflict that will increasingly be on the minds of most Catholics on the planet.

So why is
the West still arguing over buggy whips?

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First, religion, like politics, tends to be local. Most Europeans and some North Americans are indeed experiencing decline, and there's a natural tendency to assume this is the universal story.

Second, since Westerners are not responsible for expansion in the developing world, we tend not to notice it. Iraq's baby steps towards democracy have been huge news in the West, largely because it's happening as a result of massive American and British intervention; Mali's emergence as a stable democracy in Western Africa, meanwhile, has not attracted the same attention, in part because the Africans did it almost entirely on their own.

Third, as Lamin Sanneh, a native of Ghana who now teaches at the Yale Divinity School, notes in his 2003 book *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, the 20th century explosion in Christianity occurred at a time when "conversion" had become a bad word. Thus it has largely flown below the radar.

"Political correctness created a PR vacuum," Sanneh wrote.

Fourth, there is sometimes a smug Western assumption that the dynamism of the church in the developing world is ephemeral, and that as Africa, Asia and Latin America develop economically they will experience the same secularism as the global North. It's an untested assumption, and one that many Christians in the South bitterly resent.

Fifth, the expansion of Catholicism in the developing world is sometimes exploited for ideological purposes by European and North American conservatives as a blanket riposte to any criticism of the church. If we're growing like gangbusters, the suggestion runs, what could be wrong?

Yet if the expansion of Catholicism in the South contradicts leftist predictions of demise, the corollary does not follow, i.e., that it is an endorsement of conservative Catholicism in its Western form. In fact, experts such as Sanneh say the growth of Christianity in the developing world has precious little to do with Western ideological debates, and is far more connected with the way Christianity interacts with indigenous cultures and their concerns.

This is perhaps the

bottom line on today's bear market in world Catholicism -- it deserves to be taken seriously on its own terms, not made into a club to fight Western battles.

On June 19, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice will convene a summit in Cairo of Catholic bishops and other leading figures from Africa, the Middle East, and Europe to discuss human rights and democracy in Christianity and Islam. The idea is to explore the potential Christian contribution to fostering peace and stability in the developing world, and to confront radical currents within Islam.

Taking place under the aegis of Scola's Oasis International Studies and Research Centre, the gathering will probably attract scant attention in the Western press. Yet this is the sort of conversation that will increasingly dominate the "upside down church" now taking shape.

Those interested in thinking beyond buggy whips would do well to take notice.

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