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Ten mega-trends shaping the Catholic church

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 22, 2006 All Things Catholic

Christmas is a season of giving, and in a rather self-serving application of that spirit, this week I'm asking readers to give me something. Specifically, I'm asking for reactions to my list of the 10 most important "mega-trends" in Catholicism today, which appears below.

My next book is titled "The Upside Down Church," a sort of sneak preview of Catholic history in the 21st century. I outline a series of mega-trends which I believe are turning the church on its head, especially with respect to the dominant paradigms in the 40-plus years since the close of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In order for that analysis to hold water, however, I have to identify these mega-trends correctly.

By "mega-trend," I mean a deep impulse shaping Catholic thought and life at the universal level, a sort of "tectonic plate" whose shifts lie beneath the fault lines and upheavals of the present. I have in mind not single issues, but currents of history which cause some issues to rise in importance and others to fall. A mega-trend, by the way, does not have to be specifically Catholic, but rather something that affects Catholicism in a significant way. For example, the rise of Islam, especially its more radical forms, certainly belongs on the list.

My request is this: Read this list, and ponder it. Are there major forces I've neglected? Are there items here that don't belong? Does this list correspond with your own sense of what's happening in the church?

Some readers may want to react using the "comments" box below, which will allow a conversation to develop in this space. Others may not want to share their thoughts with the rest of the world, but wouldn't mind passing them along to me. If that's the case, address them to jallen@ncronline.org [1]. Either way, I will be grateful.

The list is not organized in order of importance.

One: The North/South Shift

In 1900, there were 459 million Catholics in the world, 392 million of whom lived in Europe and North America. Christianity 100 years ago remained an overwhelmingly white, first world phenomenon. By 2000, there were 1.1 billion Catholics, with just 380 million in Europe and North America, and the rest, 720 million, in the global South. Africa alone went from 1.9 million Catholics in 1900 to 130 million in 2000, a growth rate of almost 7,000 percent. This is the most rapid and sweeping demographic transformation of Catholicism in its 2,000 year history. Sao Paolo, Jakarta and Nairobi will become what Leuvein, Milan and Paris were in the Counter Reformation period, meaning major centers of pastoral and intellectual energy. Different experiences and priorities will set the Catholic agenda as leaders from Africa, Asia and Latin America rise through the system, reshaping the texture of church life.

Two: Quest for Catholic Identity

Another major force is the relentless press for a stronger sense of Catholic identity, an impulse felt in virtually every area, from liturgy to education, from religious orders to the church's engagement with secular politics. In his famous homily 24 hours before his election as pope, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger laid out what he saw as the central challenge facing the church: a "dictatorship of relativism," meaning the rejection of objective truth. Like John Paul II before him, Benedict is keenly concerned that Catholics do not assimilate to this broader secular mentality. As the practical translation of this imperative, the church has seen a growing emphasis over the last 25 years on what sociologists call the "politics of identity" -- efforts to reinforce distinctively Roman Catholic language, practices and belief systems, our markers of difference in a rapidly homogenizing world. The emphasis on identity cuts across debates large and small, from whether theologians should have a *mandatum* from a bishop certifying their orthodoxy, to whether lay people should be allowed to purify the sacred vessels after Mass.

Three: The Rise of Islam

I was tempted to simply write "Regensburg," and leave it at that. If the importance of Islam to the church wasn't already clear, the aftermath of Benedict XVI's Sept. 12 lecture at the University of Regensburg dispelled any doubt. In the same way that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 put Islam, especially its radical currents, at the center of global consciousness, the "9/12" of Regensburg did it for the Catholic church. Especially in the wake of 9/12, Islam is coming to play the role for Catholicism once occupied by Communism, meaning the church's chief ideological rival on the world stage, the great question mark around which many debates revolve. As with Communism, attitudes towards Islam are often markers for deeper options on issues such as the Christian identity of Europe, the limits of inter-faith dialogue, the nature of missionary efforts, and the fate of Christians in the Arab world. Given that Benedict seems determined to take a more challenging stance in Catholic/Muslim relations on both terrorism and religious freedom, there is likely to be further drama ahead.

Four: The Movements

The term "movement" is used loosely (and, in some cases, imprecisely) to refer to a wide variety of new groups in the 20th century, primarily composed of laity: Sant'Egidio, the Neocatechumenate, Focolare, Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei, L'Arche, Schönstatt, Regnum Christi, and others. Though they remain niche phenomena, the movements nevertheless have a high profile due to their passion, their commitment, and the strong patronage they enjoyed under John Paul II. With their visibility and reach expanding, they will increasingly set a tone in terms of the lay apostolate. While it's something of a myth that the movements are predominantly "conservative" (Sant'Egidio and L'Arche, for example, don't fit the bill), they do have a common thread in that their activity is directed more *ad extra* than *ad intra*; that is, they're more concerned with changing the world than changing the church. In that sense, the growth of the movements is likely to produce a more outward-looking sense of the lay role; the model of an "empowered" Catholic lay person will not be primarily a DRE or liturgist, but a lawyer or bus driver or stay-at-home mother, striving to transform the secular world from the inside out.

Five: The Biotech Revolution

Given the dizzying pace of scientific change, Catholicism faces a whole new series of ethical headaches. What are the limits, for example, to genetic manipulation of human beings? Which breakthroughs in stem cell research pass doctrinal muster, such as "altered nuclear transfer"? What about calls for "embryo adoption," meaning allowing women (even unwed women, or women in same-sex relationships) to bring embryos to term which would otherwise be destroyed? As science expands its capacity to preserve life, where does the distinction lie between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" measures, between a necessary defense of the right to life and a needless prolongation of suffering? What about genetically modified food, with its potential to feed the hungry, but its uncertain impact on human health and on traditional agricultural techniques? Could condoms be

countenanced for a married, heterosexual couple where one partner has HIV/AIDS? All these questions, and scores more, bedevil moral theologians, lay activists, pastors and bishops, pulling Catholic debate into uncharted waters.

Six: The Wireless World

Once upon a time, the clerical caste held a near-monopoly on catechesis, faith formation, education ? essentially, on shaping the Catholic imagination. That monopoly has been eroded over the centuries by the invention of the printing press, the rise of a free press in the West, the emergence of theologically sophisticated laity, the spread of independent broadcast outlets, and a host of other factors. Today, anyone who can find their way to a Starbucks with a laptop can be their own publisher. The blogosphere is full of Catholic offerings: "Open Book," "Relapsed Catholic," "The Cafeteria is Closed," "Whispers in the Loggia," "the Curt Jester," to name some of the better-known. The Catholic conversation is a wide-open marketplace, and if bishops want to make themselves heard, it has to be by dint of their message rather than their office. The potential to change the calculus became clear in the Terry Schiavo case, when bloggers did more to mobilize Catholic activism than pronouncements from either the bishops' conference or the local hierarchy.

Seven: The Wojtyla Revolution

Pope John Paul II was an *ad extra* pope, more concerned with the struggle against Soviet-style Communism or a "culture of death" in the West than he was with the internal affairs of the Catholic church. In effect, John Paul cried *basta!* ("enough!") to the season of experimentation and reform that followed the Second Vatican Council, calling Catholics to a strong sense of internal unity in order to fuel a more effective engagement with the world outside. If the documents of Vatican II, as well as more amorphous understandings of their "spirit," framed debate in the post-conciliar period, it is the example of John Paul II which is most decisive for the new, "upside down" era. For our purposes, his legacy can be boiled down to a simple formula: end the navel-gazing, stop tinkering with church teachings and structures, and get on with evangelizing the world. Critics would argue that this formula led John Paul to neglect festering internal problems, and that the sexual abuse crisis, to take one example, was the legacy of that neglect. Nevertheless, the Copernican shift of John Paul's papacy was to direct the Catholic gaze to the outside world, to "take it to the street."

Eight: Globalization

Growing integration of global finance, politics, and culture marks the single most defining characteristic of our era, creating unparalleled wealth and opportunity for some, while making the misery of others a permanent source of outrage and instability. While one billion people enjoy standards of living never before achieved, another billion people get by on less than $1 a day, and some 10 million children each year die from avoidable, poverty-related illnesses. Those inequities are generating deep concern both for moral and security reasons, and they tend to engage leaders in the global South in a special way, given that the losers in the new global game tend to be predominantly in developing nations. As Southern voices become more vocal within Catholicism, therefore, concern for what John Paul II called the "globalization of solidarity" as well as markets will become an increasingly central Catholic theme. There will likely continue to be widely differing Catholic opinions on how best to express the church's social teaching in public policy, and this debate will intensify.

Nine: Polarization and its Discontents

One of the defining features of the post-conciliar era in Roman Catholicism has been a kind of Catholic tribalism, pitting left against right, liturgically oriented Catholics against social activists, local churches against Rome, and so on down the familiar litany of internal fractures. It's not just that there is division, a fact of ecclesiastical life that dates back to the Acts of the Apostles. Today's Catholic tribes attend their own

conferences, read their own journals, applaud their own heroes, and have developed their own languages, so that on the rare occasions when they encounter Catholics of other perspectives it can actually be difficult to communicate. In many ways, Catholics of all these tribes have been unwittingly evangelized by the secular culture, seeing the church as one more battlefield upon which interest group struggles are fought. Yet these divisions are also puzzling and disheartening to many Catholics, especially those under 40 who were born after Vatican II, and there are indications of a growing desire for a different way of managing relationships in the church.

Ten: The Sexual Abuse Crisis

Though the epicenter of the sexual abuse crisis remains the English-speaking world, the phenomenon is global. Its toll has been enormous, above all in the United States. It includes settlements of more than $1 billion and the bankruptcy of, to date, four American dioceses (Portland, Davenport, Spokane, and Tucson). More deeply, the crisis has badly damaged the church's public image, caused a loss of confidence in the leadership of the church, injured relationships between bishops and priests, and made it much more difficult for good priests to carry out their ministry. All of this was brought back into focus recently when the Preacher of the Papal Household, Capuchin Fr. Rainero Cantalamessa, suggested the need for penance related to the scandals. To date, there is still debate within the church as to the causes and context of the crisis, but there seems little question that the fallout from this trauma will be with Catholicism for some time.

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