

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 12, 2013 at 11:08am

Could Catholicism survive thousands of years down the road?

by Bill Tammeus

A small catholic

A book discussion group has sprung to life *ex nihilo* in my congregation.

That's why I've just read the classic 1960 novel by Walter M. Miller Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, which is marinated in Catholicism. The plot has me imagining what Catholicism might look like 600 or 1,100 or 2,000 years from now.

There's no certain way to answer that, but the exercise is still worth the time. And Miller himself thought it profitable to make up plausible answers to the question as part of his semi-wild story about a world after nuclear war.

A quick plot summary: After a global nuclear war, a small band of surviving monks (followers of St. Leibowitz, a scientist who lived through the disaster) seeks to preserve what few books and other printed matter it can. The monks act in response to the profound anger among survivors at the scientists whose work led to this catastrophe. (Think nationwide book burning.)

The core of the material the monks save in the early years is scientific, but later, they save all the knowledge they can. They hope humanity will be able to use this material to reconstruct a world presumably saner than the one that incinerated itself.

In the novel, this now-rescued scientific knowledge helps rebuild the world but leads to a second nuclear war. But that doesn't change the fact that for long centuries, these monks are faithful to their task.

As I think about the future of Catholicism (and Christianity in general) with all that in mind, I'm taking a

much longer view than one I took in an *NCR* column last summer, when I wrote that it looked to me as if "the current hierarchical institutional expression of the Catholic church is dying and will be essentially gone in a few generations -- certainly in the U.S."

Both the Catholic and Orthodox churches (essentially one body before the Great Schism of 1054) have an enviable record of protecting and preserving what Catholics call the profession of faith. And the various Protestant denominations have developed ways to maintain doctrines and teachings over the last 500 years, except that among us Protestants, there's a proclivity to create a new church whenever there's a doctrinal disagreement.

So I don't worry much that hundreds and even thousands of years from now, barring the Second Coming, Catholics will have remained faithful in their commitment to the profession of faith, though there may be some divisive arguments over what should be considered part of that profession.

What concerns me more than protection of the profession of faith is whether the church can be flexible enough to look more to the future than it does to the past. It is, after all, the future into which God is drawing us -- not coercively, and yet with persistence.

As Georgetown scholar John F. Haught explains in *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, "reality is shaped by promise," meaning God continues to create, using us as partners. Indeed, although we're moving toward God's ultimate plan of redemption for the whole cosmos, God guides us gently toward that promise. Again Haught: "It is out of a longing to relate deeply to the world that God foregoes any annihilating 'presence' to the world." God, in other words, relates to the world "by selflessly allowing it to achieve ever deeper autonomy."

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Living in such a world places on humanity the growing burden and opportunity of being discerning about the shape of the future into which God seeks to call us. It does not, of course, mean abandoning the past. The monks of St. Leibowitz Abbey sought, in fact, to preserve the past. And the church must do the same.

But preservation of the past must not overwhelm the church's responsibility to detect and be open to the promise God has for creation's future.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for the *Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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