

REFLECTIONS

Lawrence P. Grayson

Roads That Lead We Know Not Where

“[T]he Church is facing very hard times. The real crisis has scarcely begun. We will have to count on terrific upheavals.” Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, made these comments about the future of the Church in a radio address on Christmas 1969.

Now, half-a-century later, his perceptions have become reality. Widespread sexual abuse of children and adults by priests and bishops and their cover up has shaken the Church at all levels. Revelations of immoral behavior extending over the past 70 years in countries throughout the world – the United States, Ireland, Chile, Australia and India, among others – are leading to further investigations, me-too-type accusations, massive payouts, the resignation and removal of bishops and priests, and disillusionment and possible loss of faith among the laity.

When tranquility is restored – although it appears distant -- what will the Church look like, particularly in America? Fr. Ratzinger’s speculated:

“From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge — a Church that has lost much.”

In 1970, according to data from Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, there were 7 million people (3.4% of the population) in America who had been raised Catholic, but no longer identified with the faith. Today, there are 30 million (9.2% of the population) who are fallen away Catholics.

“She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning.”

The fact that there are 74 million self-identified Catholics in the country today is misleading. Only 68 million of them belong to a parish, and only about 16 million attend Mass at least weekly. In 1970, 23 million people -- almost half of the parishioners at that time -- attended Mass each week.

“She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity.”

Between 1970 and 2017, the number of parishes declined only slightly from 18,224 to 17,156, but 3,552 of today’s parishes do not have a resident priest. Similarly, the number of elementary schools decreased from 9,366 to 5,178; secondary schools from 1,986 to 1,201; colleges and universities from 279 to 225; and hospitals from 727 to 545.

“As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges.”

The number of adherents will likely decline in the future as the next generation is not being educated in the faith. Even as the number of parishioners has increased by 43% since 1970 -- driven by the overall population growth -- the number of students in Catholic elementary and secondary schools dropped from 4.4 million to 2.0 million, and the number of students enrolled in parish religious education programs declined from 5.5 million to 3.0 million.

“In contrast to an earlier age, it [the Church] will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision.”

From 2000, just before the clergy sex abuse scandals became a public issue, to 2017, prior to the release of the Pennsylvania report on the same subject, the number of baptisms, first communions, confirmations, marriages, and converts all declined significantly. With many state investigations of the Church being initiated and continuing media reports of clerical abuse, the marginally faithful may choose to no longer identify as Catholics. Those who convert in the future will do so because they view the Church as the way to their salvation, despite the failings of its ministers.

“[T]he full-time ministry of the priesthood will be indispensable as formerly.” The type of priest who will be needed is one who “in the name of God places himself at the disposal of man, who is beside them in their sorrows, in their joys, in their hope and in their fear.”

The number of priests has declined sharply, from 59,192 in 1970 to 37,181 in 2017. About 70% of the priests are diocesan priests, while the remainder belongs to religious orders. Compounding the shortage of priests is the fact that in 1970, 90% of diocesan priests were active in ministry; today, it is only 63%.

“As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members. Undoubtedly it will discover new forms of ministry and will ordain to the priesthood approved Christians who pursue some profession.”

There already is an extensive and growing involvement of the laity in the life of the Church. Since Pope Paul VI reestablished the permanent diaconate in 1967, the number of deacons has grown rapidly. In 2017, there were 18,287 permanent deacons in the United States and another 2,670 candidates. They perform a number of functions previously limited to priests, such as baptisms, marriages, preaching, grave site services, and certain religious observances. In addition, lay people now serve as Eucharistic ministers, lectors and sacristans, as well as in a wide variety of financial, management and administrative positions in a parish.

While many of Fr. Ratzinger’s conjectures about the future of the Church have come about, there undoubtedly will be further upheavals before equanimity is restored. His comments were made just four years after Vatican Council II in which he participated as a *peritus* or expert for the Archbishop of Cologne. Changes resulting from the Council had barely begun, but theologians were already interpreting the findings of the Council in divergent ways. Some viewed them in the light of Scriptures and tradition, while others saw them as an opportunity for radical change in the spirit of the Council. The divergent views have never been reconciled and the current turmoil caused by clerical sexual abuse has given each side an opportunity to advocate for its ideas.

Many in the hierarchy have conflicting views on the involvement of the Church in society, its administration, the distribution of authority, the priesthood, the role of women, the importance of celibacy, the possibility of married clergy, same-sex unions, the reception of the Eucharist by non-Catholic spouses and those who are divorced and remarried without a decree of nullity, and other issues that once were thought to be long settled.

Until the dogmatic disputes, which can take the Church along roads that lead we know not where are settled, there will be continuing strife. But have hope. Have faith. For, as the future pope assured us, *“when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church.”* It will arise, he said, *“from those whose roots are deep and who live from the pure fullness of their faith.”*

* * * * *

October 2018