

Challenge lukewarm Catholics to help church in U.S.

It used to be said that Roman Catholics were the largest religious body in the United States and ex-Roman Catholics the second largest. Now that needs revising. It seems that former Catholics are only the third largest group, behind Catholics and Southern Baptists. Is this progress?

If so, it's cold comfort. The "religious landscape" study released last month by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life delivered a coup de grace to the "we're not doing so bad" school which has insisted for years that, despite a few problems here and there, American Catholicism was in pretty good shape. The Pew report makes it devastatingly clear it isn't.

To recap, consider some findings cited in a previous column. While Americans as a group are big religion-switchers, Catholics are leaders in this practice. Close to one American in every three was raised Catholic, but only one in four is a member of the Catholic Church now. About 10 percent of the population is former Catholics, ranking them (as was said) just behind Southern Baptists.

As has long been the case, Catholics are nearly a quarter of all Americans. But don't be deceived - Catholic population has managed to hover at that level because of continuing immigration by Catholics, mainly Hispanics. Without them, the numbers would be dropping.

What to do? I suppose Catholic progressives will urge their familiar solutions - even more widespread Catholic acceptance of contraception, more acceptance of divorce and remarriage, married priests and women priests. We've been traveling the progressive road on the whole for four decades. Now it's clear where it leads.

My own proposal is rather different: Challenge lapsed and lukewarm Catholics - and the rest of us, too - by stressing the obligation entailed in the genuine following of Christ, in other words the obligation to become a saint.

Is this empty talk? Here is what the Second Vatican Council said in its constitution

on the church: "It is ... quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society." This is what is often called the council's universal call to holiness.

The obvious objection is of course that making demands on people as a way of attracting them to the church is an off-the-wall idea. To which the equally obvious response is: What in heaven's name else do you think will attract them - more dissent, more watered-down catechesis and homilies exhorting them to do good and avoid evil and, of course, to love, more lay ministries, more committee meetings, another resurfacing of the church parking lot? We've tried all that. It doesn't work.

I don't yearn for some golden age when all Catholics recognized and strove to realize the highest standards of the Christian life. The version of Christianity presented to Catholic laypeople in the past was often dismayingly legalistic and shallow. But although the externals and the rhetoric are different today, that still remains the predominant vision of Christianity offered to most people now. No wonder many aren't interested!

"The forms and tasks of life are many, but holiness is one. ... Each one, according to his own gifts and duties, must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith." That's Vatican Council II's universal call. As bad news about the condition of American Catholicism multiplies, we ought to give it a try. For we are a church of sinners called to be saints.

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