

Father Greeley:

'Communal' Catholics to Gain; Institutional Types to Lose

Kansas City, Mo. [RNS] — The "institutional" Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. — including such "revivalist" movements as Marriage Encounter and the Charismatic Renewal — will continue in "precipitous decline" because there is a "total absence of ideas" and "no one is listening," according to Father Andrew Greeley.

"But the Catholic Church in America will survive," he stressed, due largely to the emergence of a "saving remnant of the post-Vatican II 'new breed' which he described as 'communal Catholics'."

In fact, he said, "American Catholics as a community in our society of pluralistic integration (ethnic revival) will experience a dramatic increase in healthy self-consciousness and self-awareness." In focusing on "communal Catholics (as opposed to ecclesial Catholics)" he predicted that in "ever-increasing

numbers" they will seek explicitly the "human and religious meaning" of being a Catholic in the U.S.

Father Greeley, director of the Center for the Study of American Pluralism of the National Opinion Research Center, Chicago, observed in a special 10-year forecast on the Catholic Church for the Nov. 1 issue of the National Catholic Reporter here.

"Communal Catholicism will grow and expand. In the very long range I am confident that the ecclesial institution will be reshaped by the cultural forces which have produced the communal Catholics and which they, in turn, will articulate, reinforce, sharpen and develop.

"I do not know exactly what such a Church will look like but I think it will be an interesting one and I would like to be around to see it, but I don't expect to be,"

Father Greeley explained that

three factors mark the development of communal Catholics — their acceptance as members of American society, their educational achievement and their "rediscovery of pluralistic integration." Specifically, he said, communal Catholics are those "committed to Catholicism and self-conscious in (their) attempt to understand the Catholic experience in the U.S."

The communal Catholic, said the Chicago priest-sociologist, "does not care much what the Church as an institution says or does not say, does or does not do." They are "committed to Catholicism as a collectivity and world view."

However, they will "turn to the Church for sacramental ministry when it is needed, and may deem that ministry to be needed very frequently" in their lives. They will "not expect religious, social, moral or human guidance" from the Church, he added.

Declaring that the communal Catholic would like to have "deeply spiritual and pastoral bishops, priests who would be holy men and effective preachers, and nuns who were not off on the latest fad," Father Greeley said:

the Communal Catholic's religious commitment and his stand within the Catholic collectivity are quite independent of the intelligence, sensitivity, creativity or spirituality of the leaders of the ecclesial institution.

He described communal Catholics as not being "angry" at the ecclesial Church, "at ease" in their Catholicism, often engaged in "painful, personal and religious search," proud of their Catholic heritage, religiously concerned, and professionally competent.

Specifically, he added, they are "in favor of birth control; they tend to be against abortion; ambivalent about divorce; believe in marriage are dubious about 'sexual permissiveness' and can see no earthly reason why women should not be ordained priests" or priests be able to marry if they want to.

Stating that some communal Catholics are priests and nuns, despite the pressures of having to "straddle" two worlds, Father Greeley said he knows some who manage it.

Father Greeley went on to say that the "emergence of Catholic communalism" will mean that the "social, cultural and intellectual leadership (in the Church) will pass from the hands of hierarchy and the clergy, and from the hands of those whose principal concern is to criticize the hierarchy and the clergy, to a group of people who are more or less indifferent to the behavior of both the ordained leadership of the Church and those who are locked in dialogue with the ordained leadership."

"Over the long haul, such a shift will have a profound influence on the shape of American Catholicism, but it is too early to speculate about what such a change will mean," he said. "A mature and simultaneously sympathetic and critical self-awareness will make for a more religious behavior on the whole."

Calling communal Catholics the "saving remnant of the 'new breed' I wrote about so many

years ago," Father Greeley said he was nevertheless concerned about their attitude towards preserving Catholic schools. He indicated that communal Catholics are shrugging their shoulders as the ecclesial authorities dismantle the school system.

"May be the communalists see more clearly than I, maybe the fight to reform and renew the ecclesial structure has already been lost," he said. "But I think in this respect they are wrong."

In commenting on his projected decline of the "ecclesial Church," Father Greeley said he did not mean merely that vocations, religious practice, the Catholic "marketplace" of books, magazines and religious goods

would continue to decline. But he said, "more important the Church as an institution will have less and less influence on the lives of people."

He added that bishops, priests, nuns, intellectuals, journalists will not be taken very seriously, and the "revivalists" those movements in the Church such as Marriage Encounter and Pentecostalism "which are brave attempts to restore the 'simple enthusiasms' are almost certain to 'waste away'."

"From the National Conference of Catholic Bishops down to the parish altar society or charismatic group, from the Wanderer to the National Catholic Reporter, from Cross Currents to Fatima devotions, people just won't be interested any more."



Neither the Bible nor the Catholic tradition would have been much help at the economic summit. The President and his advisers would have sought in vain for any clear and certain answers to the twin problems of inflation and depression from theologians and churchmen. There are doubtless some clergy who have all the answers ready. It was not necessary to call in the world's best economists. Just consult your local cleric, Mr. President, and he'll tell you what to do.

But by now it is clear that beyond valid exhortations not to forget about the poor, who are the worst sufferers from inflation, churchmen do not have much to contribute to economic dialogue, unless they also happen to be trained economists. If it wasn't evident before, it is now at last beyond question: the path to religious "relevance" by providing magic answers to all social problems was a blind alley. One wonders why so many people thought for so long that moral intensity was a substitute for competence.

Does Catholic Christianity have nothing more to contribute to the solving of economic problems than pious exhortations (which admittedly need to be repeated lest the poor be forgotten) or perhaps an occasional pale echo of the latest liberal party line?

I suggest that it does have a number of very important things to contribute, but they are not answers to specific technical or policy questions. Our tradition does not tell us who to be. We may have no relevant answers, but we can be relevant people if we live our faith. Just now such people are more important than answers.

To begin with, we are people who do not despair of our fellow humans. Despite all the frailties and weaknesses which are so evident in human nature, Catholic Christians are still committed to the view that human kind is more good than bad, and that human society for all its oppressions is good rather than evil, that it exists to facilitate human growth rather than to oppress it.

We are not blind optimists like the rationalist liberals of only a decade or so ago. We do not believe naively in the easy perfectability of humankind. We are all too aware of evil in the

world. We do not believe — as does even such a wise man as Erich Fromm — that sin is merely the result of personality maladjustment and unjust social structures. We are under no illusions about the profound sinfulness of human nature.

But precisely because we can acknowledge the evil that is in humankind, we do not swing from extremes of optimism to extremes of pessimism, as do such former optimists as Robert Heilbroner, who in the last 10 years has moved from easy optimism about man and society, to the most profound and paralyzing pessimism. The evil that this author of "An Inquiry into the Human Prospect" and his friends and colleagues have just discovered is what we knew about all along. What they have forgotten in their despair is part of our faith: the goodness of all God's creation, and in particular human creation.

We may have only very moderate expectations for our fellow humans, but we have enough confidence in human goodness to have some expectations. Hence when the going gets tough, when the world looks cold, grim, and evil, we do not quit, we do not lose our nerve, we do not panic, we do not retreat to a home on Martha's Vineyard to wait in melancholy stoniness for the coming of the end.

Like Alfred the Dane, after the Mother of God spoke to him amidst the reeds of the Thames, we pick our battered and weary bodies off the ground and go back into the fray. No matter how bad the situation, we do not permit ourselves the luxury of quitting, the ease of copping out, the pleasant sadness of despair. We believe in God's love, in the presence of the Kingdom in our midst, in the possibility of human growth in love no matter how slow that growth may be.

If some people say that they don't see what difference men and women of courage and hope make when humankind is in deep trouble, then I must say that they do not see because they are blind.

Or as G. K. Chesterton put it, hope only becomes a virtue when the situation is hopeless. Right now the world needs lots of hope. If the Catholics don't have it, who will?

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