

# Romantic ideal is missing in religion

There are many reasons why our churches are graying and emptying. Conservatives attribute it to the intoxicating power of secularity, to a pampered culture that has lost its sense of self-sacrifice, to rampant individualism, to the sexual revolution and to an adolescent grandiosity in the adult children of the Enlightenment. Liberals suggest other reasons: People are treating their churches the way they treat their families and, today, family life has broken down in Western culture; little wonder the church is struggling. They point, too, to what they see as a church out of step with the culture, a church too rigid, too patriarchal, too much perceived as anti-life, anti-erotic, too much consumed with its own agenda.



Father Ron Rolheiser

## In Exile

There's some truth in all these assertions, but I'd like to suggest another reason: We've lost a romantic ideal for our faith and church lives. We've no idealistic fire left. We've subjected faith, religion and church to a scorching exorcism and have not yet moved on, to restore to them

again their angels, their proper light, their beauty. We need to reromanticize faith, religion and church and give people something beautiful with which to fall in love.

And to do this, we need more than good theology and good pastoral programs. Good theology stimulates and inflames the intellect. Thomas Aquinas and Bernard Lonergan would add that it also helps move the will. Love needs vision.

Thus, the Christian community is always in need of good academic theology. As history shows, every time the church has compromised on its intellectual tradition, seeing it as unimportant, it has paid a heavy price. Good, solid, academic theology is perennially the great corrective within church life and spirituality. Without it we lose balance.

Recently we've been blessed with an abundance of good theology. It's hardly the academy of theology that is weak at the present time. The last 30 to 40 years have produced (literally) libraries of wonderful books on Scripture, church history, liturgy, dogmatics, moral theology, spirituality and pastoral practice. We're not lacking for solid ideas.

What we're lacking is fire, romance, aesthetics, as these pertain to our faith and ecclesial lives. What needs to be inflamed today inside religion is its romantic imagination, and this is not so much the job of the theologian as it is the job of the saint and the artist. We need great saints and great artists, ideally inside the same person.

We see this, for instance, in Francis of Assisi. Francis was not a great theologian by the standards of the academy of theology, and it was not his insights as a theologian that so moved history and transformed Christianity. He does not have major cities named after him, nor more than 300 congregations of men and women trying to live out his charisma because of the books he wrote. His greatness lay in his sanctity and in his art and in the particular way he brought those together.

It was as a saint and artist that he was able to inflame the romantic imagination of the church and the world. When he took off his clothes and walked naked out of Assisi, he

wasn't preaching from a pulpit, lecturing from a university podium or writing a book. He was making an aesthetic, saintly gesture, and that gesture, complete with the commitment he made afterward to back it up, helped restructure the romantic imagination of Christianity and the world in general. Seven hundred years later, his gesture and his life still speak. Such is the power of great saints and great artists.

We see this, too, though to a lesser extent, in the effect of great works of religious art. Take, for example, the painting of the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci: Nobody today cannot not picture the Last Supper as he painted it, even though scholars agree that Jesus and his disciples at table would not have looked anything like his imaginative depiction of it. But one great artist and one great painting can permanently brand itself into the imagination.

It is this, saints and gospel art, that we most need to revitalize our faith and our churches today. Generally speaking, the theologians are doing their part, and so, too, are diocesan and parish programs. But solid ideas and solid programs alone are not enough. They need to be backed by saints and artists in ways that can rekindle the romantic imagination. We need a new Francis, a new Clare, a new Augustine, a new John of the Cross, a new Therese of Lisieux.

Intellectuals and artists come at conversion from different sides. Bernard Lonergan, a great intellectual, used to say: "Conversion begins in the intellect." Morris West, a great novelist, used to say: "All miracles begin with falling in love!" I doubt they ever met, but I've no doubt they would have respected each other because both are right. Without vision the heart doesn't know where to go; but, without romantic fire it doesn't want to go anywhere, least of all to church.

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser is a theologian, teacher and award-winning author. He currently serves in Toronto and Rome as the general councilor for Canada for his religious order, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

## Memorial Mass Schedule for 2004

Third Saturday of each Month

Open to the Public  
8:30 - 9:30 a.m.

### All Souls' Chapel

January 17 • February 21 • March 20  
April 17 • November 20 • December 18

### Chapel of St. Bernard

May 15 • June 19 • July 17  
August 21 • September 18 • October 16

### Open Bereavement Groups

are offered from 9:30 - 10:30 a.m. at the cemetery's

### Family Service Center

3rd Saturday of each month from  
September through June



## Holy Sepulchre Cemetery

2461 Lake Avenue Rochester, NY • 585-458-4110  
www.holysepulchre.org