

Peace: Catholicism's Not in Total Crisis



Last week, quietly and with essentially no media coverage, Frère Pierre-Marie Delfieux, who founded the Community of Jerusalem, a remarkably vibrant renewal movement centered in the Church of Saint Gervais and Saint Protais in Paris – with rapidly growing affiliates across Europe and Canada – died and was buried. His farewell Mass at Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral drew an overflow crowd, with lots of young people of high school and college age. And hundreds of priests and a dozen bishops, all of whom took part in a very beautiful and moving liturgy – one of the attractive hallmarks of the Community.

I only heard of this because a friend in Paris, who introduced me to San Gervais some years ago, rightly thought I'd want to know. Amidst all the flurry about the pope's resignation and speculations about his successor, maybe it was only to be expected that the press wouldn't have enough stamina left over to report on a different kind of Catholic story, a highly positive one at that, and in Europe – secular France, no less. Besides, it complicates the already established story line of a Church in total crisis.

It's emblematic of where we are at present that something that is going beautifully right, as many things are in the Catholic Church, gets no attention while many people, including many Catholics, are obsessed with the things that have been going wrong. Scandal sells papers, and always will, of course. Still, there's much else happening out there that needs to be reckoned with if you really want a full picture of Catholicism at this special moment in Church history.

It's kind of the Catholic version of the sequester: despite all the apocalyptic hand-wringing about crises and institutional dysfunction, life largely goes on – and even flourishes, with many wonderful surprises. And anyway, as Ezra Pound once said, “an institution that survived the picturesqueness of the Borgias has a certain native resiliency.”

It's a good to keep such things in mind as the papal conclave approaches. (I myself will be flying to Rome today. EWTN asked me to be one of the co-hosts of the live television commentary, which will begin Thursday evening March 7 and then continue, following the schedule the cardinals vote on this week. I will also be writing a brief daily commentary, which you will be able to access on this page along with our regular columnists. Tune in and come back daily.) Because we need more accurate and measured assessments of this papal election.

A lot of squirrely speculation has emerged lately ranging from the need to reform the Curia to the necessity of a pope-administrator and other mechanical fixes. Somehow this super-bureaucrat is also expected to be highly charismatic – and pastoral – and a slew of other things that it's difficult to imagine in one human being. The list of desiderata would be harmless if it did not seem to be setting up the next pope for inevitable failure when he can't meet a whole series of impossibly high expectations.

Choosing a pope is important. Like an American president, a pope wields immense power over a large people, a flock about as large as the population of China spread over the entire globe. But also like a president, there are limits to what one man, even one man surrounded by other remarkable men, can achieve. And beyond simple human limitations, do we really know what will reinvigorate Catholicism now and help get us past multiple, large challenges? Most of the suggestions I hear seem good, so far as they go. But they tend to be better versions of things already being tried. That's desirable, but not nearly enough.

Even the New Evangelization – the Vatican's umbrella term for fresh efforts to re-convert former Christian nations especially in Europe and maybe even spur a new period of missionary labors – seems mostly to envision moving in old tracks with maybe more use of new technologies. Nothing wrong with that either, but it just doesn't seem to take firm hold on our quite recalcitrant reality.

You can't help feeling that we need something almost entirely new, unimagined to date. A movement of holiness – and basic instruction again, to be sure – but formulated and carried out in this day in ways not yet come to birth. Cardinal Wuerl was getting at this the other day when he said that the Church cannot do business as usual. But he wisely didn't go beyond some general notions about what the new way of doing business will be. The older methods, which have been tried over the past few decades under two wise popes, have been rather disappointing, to say the least.

Also, the Church makes a mistake when it tries too hard to engage the world. Karl Barth, the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, pointed out after the Second Vatican Council (to which he had been invited but couldn't attend owing to illness): "Is it so certain that dialogue with the world is to be placed ahead of proclamation to the world?" That's a call for a prophetic stance, not some peaceful marketing campaign. Vatican II's sweeping blueprint for Catholic social engagement, *Gaudium et spes*, in particular, struck Barth as not only overly optimistic, but out of tune with the understanding of the "world" in the New Testament. Historically, he pointed out, Christianity has often clashed with "the world."

We're going to have to think through this and many other challenging truths in the days and weeks to come. But as Frère Pierre-Marie Delfieux and the Community he founded show, there are answers, good ones, to current challenges. They may come with a great reforming pope like Gregory VII, or maybe – as at Cluny and Clairvaux, in the founding of the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits – they will rise up from spiritual impulses no one can anticipate – until they actually appear.

It's happened both ways in the past and, no doubt, will again. Oremus.

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