

Humility, respect and silence: Asian Church may hold the key to reaching former Catholics



I am traveling in the United States, a country where one of the fastest growing religious identifications is “former Catholic” and where over the past few years the number of people who describe themselves as having no religion has topped one in five. Many of those, of course, are former Catholics.

Because of this wholesale “defection” from the Church, preceded by and paralleled in the Churches of Europe and Australia, parishes and dioceses are instituting programs to invite people back.

A church I passed in San Francisco had a tattered banner on its black iron fence issuing such an invitation. The recently concluded synod of bishops in Rome on “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith” gave much attention to the same sort of efforts.

While the Churches of Asia have not yet experienced massive departures, more and more congregations are growing gray as young people drift away from involvement. Whether gradual or sudden, the decline we see in the West is likely to happen in Asia as well.

So, do the attempts to draw people back to the Church in America and elsewhere offer some sort of model that we in Asia can use, perhaps putting it in place before the situation reaches crisis point?

On the contrary, the Churches of Asia might be in a position to offer a different model to the West, a

model typified by the call at the synod by Cardinal-designate Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila for a Church marked by humility, respect for others and silence.

How might those three virtues work for our Asian Churches and for those elsewhere?

If a toothpaste manufacturer found that in spite of all its advertizing, customers were throwing away their toothbrushes, the company would make every effort to find out what customers need and want, asking why they no longer care for their product and are even rejecting the whole idea behind it.

Of course, the Church's "product" is Jesus Christ, but the advertizing is our own creation and it clearly is not working. In fact, it is driving "customers" away.

Banners inviting people to come back are arrogant. They imply that those who pass by are lost wanderers who need only return to the fold to get "put right."

Instead, the Church must begin by asking the help of those people. "Why have you left?" "To what extent was your departure our fault?" "What might we have done wrong?" "Might we have poorly expressed our message, betrayed it or poorly communicated it?" "Need we apologize for anything?" "What are you looking for?" "Can we join you in that search?" "Might you be looking for a way back but fear your reception?"

That is humility, and though our Christmas and Good Friday liturgies stress that virtue, the Catholic Church has never been noted for it, even when individual Catholics have.

After all, even Archbishop Tagle will soon be "His Eminence." But, without humility a regeneration of the Church anywhere in the world will be impossible. We must admit failure, or at least inadequacy, and not merely with empty words, but with rueful and repentant sincerity.

Having asked the humble questions, we must actually listen to the answers. We might not like them.

We might not think they deal with basic issues or that they are even trite. We might not agree with their accuracy. But, we must respect those who have left us, realizing that they have something to teach us not only in the reasons for their leaving, but also in the experiences they have had “outside.”

The temptation when we hear criticism is to respond to it, whether the criticism is of us personally or of some idea or institution to which we give allegiance. The same is true when we are faced with the pain or confusion of others.

However, the best response to the painful things we hear in respectful listening is silence. Silence is an admission that we do not have quick, glib answers to difficult problems, and a predisposition to silence reminds us that we do not need them.

It also means that we choose to take what we learn into our hearts, to make them a part of our reflection and prayer. We unite ourselves with those who search. Silence brings us back to humility. As Archbishop Tagle said, “The Church must discover the power of silence.”

If all of us in the Churches of Asia, especially those in positions of leadership, can learn the value of humility, respect and silence and put them into practice, we may have something precious to offer the Churches of the West that seem to be pursuing a vain hope that banners and programs offering invitations, exhortations and preaching will bring wanderers home.

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