

A pluralist Church must cast off defunct Eurocentrism



Globalization's consequences: A pluralist Church must cast off defunct Eurocentrism The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination, with more than a billion members worldwide. Its Latin Rite (there are several others) is the only organized branch of Christianity to expand substantially beyond Europe.

However, this globalization is relatively recent. Yes, there were Franciscans with Marco Polo on his 13th century journey to China. And in the early phase of Spanish and Portuguese colonization of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the traders, treasure hunters and armies took chaplains along.

The Franciscans and Jesuits who operated on those continents did so under the auspices of the kings of Spain, Portugal and France rather than the pope. Seen by most locals as agents of the colonizing powers, their real impact was limited even when, as in Latin America, they baptized many.

In fact, such daring, courageous and often picturesque efforts as those of Matteo Ricci in China, Peter Claver in Brazil and Roberto di Nobili in India were ultimately small in their reach and effect.

It was not until the 19th and 20th centuries that tens of thousands of European and American missionaries went anywhere that colonial powers would allow them entry. This missionary expansion was commended and encouraged in an unprecedented way by Pope Pius IX, whose 41-year pontificate (1846-1878) was the longest in history.

Ironically, while he focused on missions outside Europe, Pope Pius was adamantly closed to things happening inside Europe, things we and Church authorities take for granted today as results of the scientific and industrial revolutions and the emergence of democracy and political liberalism.

Almost as a distraction from those European challenges, the focus outside Europe, typified by new missionary congregations, was immensely productive for the growth of the Church.

However, the Vatican arrived in the 20th century clearly ill-equipped for the intellectual, political and cultural changes that were shaping Europe and the world beyond. That inability shaped much of what was discussed and decided at Vatican 2.

One thing that didn't change was the Vatican's survival as the last European absolute monarchy.

Now in the 21st century, the Vatican has more problems than answers as it struggles to maintain centralized control over a Church spread across an increasingly democratic and pluralist world. The papacy lacks the two-way communication channels and information infrastructure that will see it better equipped any time soon. And from what we have learned from the Vatileaks documents, its administrative structure either already has or is about to implode.

Nothing in scripture or tradition requires maintaining a Catholic administrative structure that in its present form is no more than two centuries old.

What is to be done? Perhaps an unintended consequence of the massive and now completed worldwide missionary expansion of the Roman Catholic Church under Vatican auspices holds a clue to the Church's future.

Pluralism, cultural variety, minority status (especially in Asia), the use of languages other than Italian and the increasing recognition of democratic human rights hold great potential for a Church bogged down in a defunct European Christendom.

Expressing faith in Jesus Christ in the Catholic tradition is very different when done in China or Indonesia.

Can places that were once the objects of European mission teach the Universal Church about facing its challenges? Will their voices be allowed a hearing?

There is no sign yet that they will and if things stay as they are, we can be sure of one thing: the implosion will continue unabated.

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