

The elephant in the room of the bishops' assembly



A very large elephant was standing in the middle of the room when the American Catholic bishops met in Baltimore in mid-November and when they discussed, and then adopted, their statement on the Eucharist.

The elephant was the phenomenon occurring in religion generally in the United States, and for that matter throughout Western society – namely, the decline in church membership, and, beyond that, the abandonment of values and beliefs based upon religious standards.

Ominously, it is not uniquely a Catholic problem. All religions are losing members. Actually, at least in this country, the Catholic Church is doing better than many other denominations, thanks, in great measure, some analysts of what is happening say, to the arrival into the country of Hispanic immigrants.

The bishops noted the blow to regular Church life inflicted by restrictions and realities of the COVID pandemic. Popular conversation often blames the clergy sex abuse scandal as the cause of flight of members from the Church. Certainly, the sex abuse crisis justifiably has disgusted very many Catholics, and the Church, its leaders and its clergy have lost esteem – and worse, trust regarding their commitment to the Gospel.

Current, at times angry, debates among Southern Baptists, the country's second largest Christian group, after Catholics, reveal how intensely people feel outrage and betrayal when they see evidence of sex abuse perpetrated by those in authority whom they trusted.

Still, the loss of enthusiasm began before sex abuse seized the headlines, and religious denominations, in which few cases of abuse have been publicly reported, are losing members.

Cross the Atlantic to Europe, and it is as bad and indeed worse. Take Spain and Ireland as examples. Catholic fervor in Spain took the Church across the world. For almost half a millennium, the Irish people resisted British efforts to draw them away from Catholicism. Now, in terms of religious practice, Spain and Ireland are disasters.

At the edge of the American bishops' meeting were demands that their document on the Eucharist directly sanction professed Catholics who in political offices tolerate, or even enable, abortion.

European Catholicism is a fearful story in this regard. Legislatures, filled with elected representatives who identify themselves as Catholics, pass laws not only favorable to abortion but to other immoral behaviors not yet accepted in this country.

Everyone disappointed that the Baltimore meeting did not produce what some wanted in terms of chastising these politicians should remember that no group in the American society, for the past half-century, and earlier, has worked as energetically as the American Catholic bishops to halt abortion.

No voice in the world more loudly and constantly has pleaded for human life than the papacy. The tradition absolutely continues – witness the pope's remarks about abortion in September, but the Vatican has a broad perspective.

Promoting immoral conduct is a problem, and certainly evil should be opposed, but the problem with the offending politicians is a symptom of a wider, insidious concern.

Morality, if it is founded on religion, is fading. It is a

fact.

Can this trend be halted or reversed? The bishops are making the effort with this document. More power to them. It outlines Catholic doctrine regarding the Eucharist, and, quite movingly, it reminds Catholics that the Eucharist, in which Jesus, body, blood, soul and divinity, is present is a gift from Almighty God for human peace, guidance and life.

This is not the first time in history that Catholicism has had a setback. The Protestant Reformation was catastrophic for the Church, but the Catholic faith roared back, because individual Catholics took their faith seriously.

The COVID epidemic should be a lesson. We just cannot lick it. We are not smart enough, with all our money and all our smarts. If many other plagues are indications, we gradually will learn, and we gradually will find ways to subdue the disease, but even that process reveals human limitation. We need God.

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