

A shrinking faith, here and abroad



Likely, when American Catholics meet, they do not rush to discuss the current situation of parishes in Germany. Wait a year or two.

In Germany, several large, prominent and historic dioceses have announced plans radically to cut back on the number of their parishes, not always with popular approval. The Holy See has entered the picture. Argumenta are heated.

Closing parishes in Germany results from these facts. Fewer and fewer people are attending Mass and receiving the sacraments regularly. Fewer and fewer people are identifying themselves as Catholics. Consequently, churches are virtually empty, even on Sundays. Fewer and fewer people associate with any religion.

The number of Catholic vocations is plunging downward. Clergy now serving in parishes are growing old. For them, as for anyone, nature will take its course. No replacements are waiting in the wings.

Catholicism is facing hard times elsewhere in Europe. Even those once reservoirs of Catholicity, Spain and Ireland, are seeing their ancient ties with all things Catholic not only strain but break altogether.

It is not sudden. Seeds were sown long ago, with the coming, 200 years ago, for instance, of industrialization. Population shifted from the farms to the cities. Wars brought catastrophes, totally upsetting life in every sense. Changes in mass communications have contributed mightily to overall

transformation, not always for the best, of entire cultures.

Now everywhere is the general drift from an understanding of, let alone respect of, almighty God. The clergy sex abuse crisis hardly helped.

A significant factor has been not just the utter rejection of religion but disappointment with churches, including the Catholic Church, as sources of contact with God.

This time is coming soon for the Church in the United States. American culture more and more spurns institutional religion, in virtually all forms. Loss of trust in clerical leadership has hurt, as has sin among clergy. The general, bitter divisions in society are affecting religion, especially in certain places in Catholicism.

For example, American Church leaders consistently, without exception, have publicly spoken for an outreach to, and welcoming attitude for, immigrants. It is not the most politically correct position to take. Neither is the Catholic position regarding legalized abortion, legalized same-gender marriage, universal health care and international relations.

More than a few onetime Catholic Americans complain the Church offers no nourishment as they hunger for God. An American political figure, now in a major public office, has publicly stated that he left the Catholic Church because "Jesus Christ is not in it."

The day may already be here in Germany and may soon come in this country when the theory of individualization of religion leads many Catholics to look to other places for God, or to no place at all.

Lines in the sand may be deepened, here as in Europe, as the Church holds onto its positions regarding the right to life, marriage and other human relationships, and certain other flashpoint questions.

Being an active, believing Catholic will be difficult. Catholics will be resented. Society will scorn the genuine practice of religion. This already has begun.

Rarely if ever has Catholicism been totally accepted in this country, unlike Germany, Spain or Ireland, but Catholics in the past in America stood by the institutional Church, and by each other, in devotion to the Church.

This is slipping away.

The unavoidable consequences will bring each Catholic, in Europe, in America and across the world, face to face with questions. What is religion? What is Catholicism? Why do people truly need it? Why do they need God? What difference does it make? Then must come a courageous decision based on firm conviction.

The widow of a man who died of COVID-19 recently spoke of his peace at the end. It was because of his Catholic faith, she said. As with literally billions of others over the centuries, he knew that his faith was worth it.

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