

The irresistible rise of the Third Church



Anyone who believes that God is at work in the Church should be aware of it

are the very early days of a phenomenon that will reshape Christianity forever, the coming of what theologians call the "Third Church."

The "First Church" was that of the original disciples and the generations that followed them, centered on the Mediterranean and making the first missionary advances into lands and cultures outside of Israel.

The men and women of that First Church bequeathed to us many treasures: the New Testament, the core elements of our worship, our philosophical and theological systems and our commitment to engage in dialogue with the religions, philosophies and cultures of the world.

The missionary endeavors of those early centuries led to the development of the "Second Church," centered in Europe. It was the Church of mass Christianity. Societies and cultures were shaped by the Christian commitment of rulers and people. The "outside world" of non-belief was geographically and psychologically remote and marginal to daily life. When it was encountered, it was often as an enemy, but always as an object of proselytization. We still live in that Church, but increasingly find ourselves moving in a new situation, a new Church, the Third Church.

This new Church has no geographic center because it is worldwide. The statistics tell the story. In 1910, 80 percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today, a century later, the majority of us live in Africa, Asia and Latin America, with less than 40 percent of us in the West.

In just five years between 2004 and 2009, the number of Catholics in Asia increased by nearly 11 percent.

The missionary thrust from Christ through the first and second Churches has carried us beyond borders of races, nations and cultures. For many Catholics, perhaps the first inklings of change came during Vatican II when photos of the world's bishops showed faces from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

What is distinctive about this Church? Western Christians usually do not even notice how deeply their Christianity has been shaped by religious traditions and cultures that pre-dated the preaching of the Gospel in Europe. So too are the Churches of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific being shaped by religions and cultures that preachers of the Gospel encountered there.

That means ideas of God, of holiness, of worship, of community, of ministry — of everything that makes a Church — are gradually becoming radically different from what has been "normal" for more than a millennium and a half. Cherished and time honored traditions and formulations of faith are being called into question.

The Third Church lives in the midst of varied beliefs or unbelief, with little or decreasing political, social and cultural power. This is leading to new styles of worship, of theologizing, of community, of evangelization.

Since Christians of the Third Church, especially in Asia, are often a powerless and sometimes persecuted minority in their societies, they tend to view the role of the Church and its institutional forms from a different perspective from that of the West, where the Church is only now beginning to lose political, moral and intellectual power.

Asia's Christians face questions that Western Christians have not faced in centuries, if ever. As they struggle to find answers to new questions, some of those answers will appear inadequate to those who faced and answered different questions. Some will actually be inadequate, as inadequate as Western theological formulas and practices. Our theology of the Trinity, for example, may take unforeseen directions as Indian Christians try to explain what we believe about God using Indian rather than Greek philosophic modes of thought.

On various levels, people in the Churches of the West (which are still in charge) have had mixed reactions to the coming of the Third Church. Sometimes, there is rejoicing that the Holy Spirit is working in new ways in new places. Sometimes, there is fear of the unknown and a refusal to allow others to make their own mistakes as the West made its own. Much of Catholic history since Vatican II can be read as a series of attempts to protect the Second Church from the changes that are coming with the Third Church. Many times, the phenomenon is ignored. But, love it or fear it, a new Church is being born. It will take several lifetimes, but eventually Christianity throughout the world will be different.

Yet, as the characteristics of this Third Church gradually but with increasing momentum develop, we continue to live in varying degrees within the Second Church. The result is a tension within the People of God, within our institutions and within ourselves.

The tensions in the period of overlap between the first and second Churches gave birth to creative and enduring ways to be Church (notably monasticism). Likewise, the transition period in which we live will, under the Holy Spirit, give birth to now undreamed of ways to be Church.

Centuries from now we will be looked upon as the early Christians of what will in the future be the normal, everyday way to follow and proclaim Christ. We may be envied for having lived in an exciting time of transition. We will be misunderstood. We may be vilified for getting so much wrong and bequeathing structures and ways of thinking, acting and worship that seem constricting and short-sighted. We will be grist for whatever may be the equivalent of doctoral dissertations.

Anyone who believes that God is at work in the Church should be aware of what is happening. We must pay attention to the Churches throughout the world, learning from them and praying with and for them. Reading and visiting (in some places this might only entail crossing town to a different neighborhood) are important tools. It would be a shame to miss one of the biggest events in the history of Christianity because we thought the way we have been is the way to be.

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