

WHAT WILL THE CATHOLIC CHURCH BE LIKE IN 100 YEARS?

Many of us as Catholic school administrators have read in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* that:

The complexity of the modern world makes it all the more necessary to increase awareness of the ecclesial identity of the Catholic school. It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristics and its “structure” as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry. The Catholic school participates in the evangelizing mission of the Church and is the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out. In this way, “Catholic schools are at once places of evangelization, of complete formation, of inculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds.”¹ The ecclesial nature of the Catholic school, therefore, is written in the very heart of its identity as a teaching institution. It is a true and proper ecclesial entity by reason of its educational activity, “in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony.”² Thus it must be strongly emphasized that this ecclesial dimension is not a mere adjunct, but is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission.³ The fostering of this dimension should be the aim of all those who make up the educating community.

Since Catholic schools are a place of ecclesial experience, those who administer them in the early years of the third millennium are invited here to look at trends that will radically reshape the Church. “Revolutionize” is the author’s word. The trends will pursue their own course, interacting with one another and with culture in unpredictable ways. They are simply presented descriptively as the way things are moving.

During the first ten years of the twenty-first century, many of us have listened to John L. Allen Jr. who is a widely quoted reporter on the Catholic scene in North America today on CNN or PBS. His column *All Things Catholic* on the National Catholic Reporter’s (NCR) website has assisted us in recognizing him as Vatican correspondent for the NCR and Vatican analyst for CNN and National Public Radio.

As one of the world’s foremost religion journalists, he has recently offered us an unexpected and provocative look at where the

Catholic Church is headed as well as what changes it will mean for all of us.

In *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing The Catholic Church*, John L. Allen Jr. forecasts the mega-trends he believes will transform the Church into the twenty-second century. In preparation for a symposium on mega-trends in church and society in June 2000 in San Antonio with Dr. Reginald Bibby and Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., he stated:

By ‘mega-trend,’ I mean a deep impulse shaping Catholic thought and life at the universal level, a sort of ‘tectonic plate’ whose shifts lie beneath the fault lines and upheavals of the present. I have in mind not single issues, but currents of history, which cause some issues to rise in importance and others to fall. A mega-trend, by the way, does not have to be specifically Catholic, but rather something that affects Catholicism in a significant way.

Allen establishes six criteria that would guide his top-ten list:

1. The trend has to apply to the global church.
2. It has to affect the church at the grassroots level.
3. It has to be a trend that church leadership feel compelled to engage.
4. It has to have explanatory power; helping to make sense of otherwise disconnected church developments.

5. It must help anticipate some new ecclesial developments.
6. It cannot be ideologically driven, which means to quote the author:

It shouldn't be a judgment about what's happening in the Church. Rather, it should describe a current trend that Catholics of all theological outlooks and political persuasions should be able to recognize, even if they might draw very different conclusions about its meaning or what to do about it.⁴

TREND #1

The first trend is the transformation of the Catholic church into a genuine world church. Clearly, the cultural centre of Catholicism is shifting from Europe and North America to the global South. In 1900, 200 million of the world's 266 million Catholics lived in Europe and North America. In 2000, more than 75 per cent lived in the Southern Hemisphere, which by 2050 will have seven of the 10 most Catholic countries.

This population shift will move church leadership to a more global focus. The reader can hear the echoes as Allen sketches out the distinctive ecclesial issues that will need attention in the decades to come.

TREND #2

The second trend, evangelical Catholicism, highlights the struggles to preserve Catholic identity and normative church doctrine. Some examples of evangelical Catholicism include changes to the liturgy to reflect more accurate translations of the original biblical text, Catholic education and a culture of life.

TREND #3

The third mega-trend is the emergence of Islam, which has replaced Judaism as Catholicism's most important partner in interfaith dialogue. The author is very clear stating that in spite of the negative fallout associated with Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address, the Pope sees Islam as a potential collaborator in the fight against the postmodern forces of secularization and relativism.

TREND #4

In the chapter on the fourth trend, the new demography, the author outlines the enormous changes in global population

patterns. The fertility anxiety that has developed as a result of falling birth rates in Western Europe and Japan is of particular interest to the reader. The long-shot consequences of the new demographic for the world church are extensive.

TREND #5

The fifth trend is the expanding role of the laity. Here the reader is presented with the wide range of lay movements and the challenges of lay ecclesial ministry.

TREND #6

The biotech revolution is the sixth trend, which includes cloning, in vitro fertilization, embryonic stem cell research, end of life issues, genetic engineering, genetically modified organisms, as well as the justice and health care issues. These are the biotechnology issues attracting unprecedented attention from the church's teaching office.

TREND #7

The seventh trend is globalization, which brings with it both opportunities and challenges. While more people are enjoying prosperity, most people worldwide still live in poverty. Growth in China and India has enabled the two countries to cut the share of the world's population that is in extreme poverty in half, from 40 to 20 per cent. This global trend will lead to an ever more-intense emphasis on Catholic social teaching.

TREND #8

The eighth trend on ecology is where the Church has an opportunity to play a major role in global decisions on environmental issues. In his message for World Peace Day, January 1, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI told us:

The degradation of the environment is a pressing moral problem that threatens peace and human life itself. We cannot remain indifferent to what is happening around us, for the deterioration of any one part of the planet affects us all.

The church's commitment to environmental protection flows from a religious duty to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction.

TREND #9

Multipolarism, the ninth trend, demonstrates the shift in the world's balance of power. From viewing the United States and its allies on one side with the former Soviet Union and its allies on the other as the world's only superpowers, we now have the major blocs; the so-called BRIC nations comprised of Brazil, Russia, India and China, and the Shi'ite Axis of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Central Asia countries. It will be a task for the Church to engage these blocs in dialogue in a new style of diplomacy, working with the first on social justice concerns, and the latter on moral concerns.

TREND #10

The tenth trend is cited as Pentecostalism, the fastest growing religious movement in the world. Pentecostalism refers to a movement within Christianity emphasizing the direct personal experience of God through the "baptism of the Holy Spirit," which often, though not always, is believed to produce spiritual gifts such as healing, vision and speaking in tongues. Pentecostals often regard themselves as revising the spiritual power and enthusiastic worship of the early Christian church.⁵

John L. Allen Jr. considers 14 possible factors contributing to the rapid growth of Pentecostalism. He does acknowledge that many of these trends stand in tension. The conservative impulse of evangelical Catholicism, for example, pulls in the opposite direction of an increased attentiveness to inculturation and the positive contributions of indigenous religions.

The trends are not unrelated to one another. *World church*, not surprisingly is closely related to *the new demography*, to *multipolarism* and to *globalization*.

Each chapter is divided into two sections. Allen propels the reader into a crash course about what is happening not only in the Church but also in economics, global politics, diplomacy and similar matters. The second section, *What It Means* speculates on consequences of the trends from near certain, to probable, to possible, to long shot.

Allen is simply asking us to face the facts of the modern world including cultural and religious pluralism plus all the challenges of modern science regarding our origins, our survival and our well-being.

In addition, the author dedicates an entire chapter of his explanation of why certain trends (clerical sexual abuse, the priest shortage, the growing role of women, recentralization of authority in the Church) did not make the list of trends.

This text, *The Future Church*, is not casual bedtime reading. Reading the book requires an alert mind, ready to digest information and grasp complexities. I leave you with a sample of John L. Allen Jr.'s writing:

*Fostering holiness in the upside-down Church of the twenty-first century will require special courage—the courage of humility, of patience, of perspective. Above all, it will require the courage to think beyond the interests of one's own Catholic tribe, conceiving the Catholic future not in zero-sum terms but as a bold synthesis of the best of each of the Church's constituencies. If Catholicism can generate that kind of courage on a mass scale, it could form an eleventh trend, arguably the most consequential of all.*⁶

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 102.

² Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, n. 34.

³ Congregation for Catholic Education, n. 33.

⁴ John L. Allen Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing The Catholic Church*, 417.

⁵ Allen Jr., 377-379.

⁶ Allen Jr., 456.

The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing The Catholic Church is published by Doubleday Religion, 2009; ISBN: 978-0-38552038-6.

Visit the Vatican website at www.vatican.va to read the full text of *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*.

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