

## **The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church**

John L. Allen, Doubleday, 2009, 469 pp., \$28.

*Review by Dan Brent*

As the Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, John Allen has a unique inside view of what is going on in the Catholic Church. In this book, he attempts to identify the elements that are likely to shape the Church in the new millennium. He summarizes it all with the one word “globalization”. He sees the Catholic Church as likely to play a significant role in the century because it is the world’s oldest global organization.

The first of the trends is that the Catholic Church will become more of a world church. Historically it has been largely a church of Europe and North America. But “what makes the twentieth century unique is that this tight identification between the West and Christianity disintegrated. By century’s end, 65% [up from 25%] of the Catholic population was found in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.” (p.15) Missionary status is being replaced by an indigenous church. “To put this simplistically, one million new Nigerian Catholics can’t produce a single new Irish missionary, but they can produce lots of Nigerian priests. The more a church is seen as local, the greater its potential for long-term growth.” (p.21)

So church leadership will more and more come from the southern hemisphere where the theology is conservative and the social perspective is liberal. Liberal Catholic theology is likely to find a new home in India. And the next ecumenical council may well be held in Manila or Nairobi.

Trend two is “Evangelical Catholicism”. “Across the Western world, Catholicism has gone from being a culture-shaping majority to perceiving itself as an embattled cultural minority, and is responding as embattled minorities always do.” (p.55) That’s by sharpening its own identity, distinguishing itself from its perceived enemies. “The antidote is bold proclamation of timeless truths” – i.e. evangelicalism. So we are already seeing stricter control of theologians and more traditional liturgy and discipline – like Latin and old-time translations in mass. And “in the identity-driven Catholicism of the twenty-first century, it’s entirely possible that fasting and abstinence will once again come to characterize Catholic life.” (p.88)

Trend three is “Islam”. It’s inevitable because of the numbers that the two great religions will have to interact in a global world. “There are 2.3 billion Christians and 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, representing more than 50 percent of the human family.” (p.96) Benedict XVI sees the potential of some Catholic-Muslim alliances against secularism and for a more robust involvement of religion in government. The Muslim minority Shi’ites share with Catholicism recognition of a clerical cast, building theology on tradition as well as scripture, devotion to holy heroes of the past, and religious observations like healing shrines. In fact, “many Christian writers have regarded Islam as a Christian heresy.” (p.139)

Trend four is “The New Demography”. World population trends are now going in another direction – down. “Sometime in the twenty-first century the world will begin depopulating.” (p.143) “China could lose 20 to 30 percent of its population every generation beginning around mid-century.” (p.145) White Americans now have a fertility rate of 1.8 compared to a “replacement level” of 2.1. Meanwhile the average age of the world’s population continues to increase.

This will mean an increase of pressure on religious bodies to look after their aging membership. We are likely to see the emergence of the parish nurse on parish staffs and the inclusion of adult day care in parish programs. And “euthanasia may well emerge as the flagship pro-life cause of tomorrow.” (p.169) By 2050 the largest English-speaking Catholic populations will be: Philippines 105 million, United States 98 million, Uganda 55 million, and Nigeria 47 million.

Trend five: “Expanding Lay Roles”. “Laypeople are taking it upon themselves to evangelize culture and to act on Catholic social teaching.” (p.182) “Lay people are stepping into roles once played by priests and inventing new roles to extend the Church’s pastoral reach.” (p.184) In fact, it appears that already “the number of laypeople occupying ministerial positions in Roman Catholicism has surpassed the number of ordained clergy.” Furthermore, “these new lay professional roles are held disproportionately by women” – 80 percent in the United States. (p.195)

Among the consequences will be the difficulty in retaining clerical control of church priorities and finances. Lay people tend to favor more participatory and democratic styles of leadership. Also, a fear of the church becoming “feminized” may lead bishops to adopt forms of affirmative action to favor the hiring of men. Charismatic lay people may replace clerics as the public face of Catholicism.

Trend six: “The Biotech Revolution”. Clones, chimeras (organisms with artificially mixed genetic contents), stem cell research, genetic engineering – it’s a brave new world with complex and totally unprecedented ethical questions. “Church officials will therefore seek to promote a revival in the natural-law tradition of moral theology.” (p.244) The Church will also play a major role in advocating for justice in the distribution of health care globally.

Trend seven: “Globalization”. The world is becoming a single market and society. And it’s one in which “an estimated \$1 trillion is spent on weaponry every year, making it by far the largest industry on the planet.” (p.273) And the distance between rich and poor grows. The Church will need to be a prophetic voice calling the human community to collaborate in providing social safety nets with accountability and transparency in public life. At the same time, the Church will need to rethink its own financial arrangements which are fraught with the potential for abuse and embezzlement.

Trend eight: “Ecology”. “No concept looms larger in Catholic environmentalism than human beings as stewards of creation, meaning caretakers rather than masters.” (p.301) Scarcity of water will be a critical problem in the new millennium. The sacramental

dimension of water for Catholics may move the Church to take a lead role in addressing this issue. In general, “The growing ecological consciousness within Catholicism is likely to lend momentum to . . . simplifying lifestyle and limiting consumption” as part of the spirituality of Catholics. (p.325) Perhaps a charismatic Catholic will arise to lead an effort to save the Amazon.

Trend nine: “Multipolarism”. There is a projection that Brazil, Russia, India, and China (the “BRIC” countries) will dominate the world economy in the new millennium. “The United States will remain the richest and most influential actor” but “non-Christian cultures will exercise a growing share of influence.” (p.341) This will call on the Church to work on ecumenism and to seek collaboration in addressing the growing rich-poor divide.

Trend ten: “Pentecostalism”. Allen defines it as “a movement within Christianity emphasizing direct personal experience of God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” (p.377) (Charismatics are a subset of that.) Pentecostals have a “prosperity gospel” that says God rewards faith with prosperity and punishes sin with poverty. There is an emphasis on miracles, healing, visions, and tongues. Allen expects Catholic-Pentecostal ties to grow since they have similar views on conservative issues like abortion and homosexuality. He also expects the number of Catholic Pentecostals to grow.

The book’s conclusion suggests that the “marks” of the Church in the new century will be global, uncompromising, Pentecostal, and extroverted. Global means that Catholicism will be led by the “South” – Latin America, Africa, India, and Asia – rather than by the Europeans and North Americans. The Church will be more theologically conservative, more liberal on social justice, and more biblically oriented.

“Uncompromising” means that the Church will be more “evangelical”. It will be more assertive, flaunt its uniquenesses, and be more divided (with liberal Catholics being an informal Church in exile).

“Pentecostal” means that the “Southern way of being Catholic” – more emphasis on individual charisms, more variations in organization, more lay leadership – will become dominant.

“Extraverted” means that – the doors being closed to debate on internal questions like papal authority, ordination of women, celibacy, birth control – the energy of Church will be directed to outside issues like social justice, biotechnology, environment, human rights.

Allen sees a clear leadership role for laity in the future Church. “Waiting for the Vatican or the bishops to act, or blaming them for doing it the wrong way, won’t cut it. It’s the ultimate in clericalism to believe that everything in the Church depends upon its clergy.” (p.453) “No one will inhabit the Church of his or her personal dreams,” he writes. “Catholicism . . . much of the time lifts your soul and breaks your heart in roughly equal measure. Faith in the Church has never meant believing it does everything right; it means never abandoning hope despite all the things it does wrong.” (p.455-6)