



SEVEN TRENDS IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Today's gospel is an important one for us as Catholics. In the Gospel, Jesus expresses his intention to found the church and to make Peter the leader of the church.

Our church is now almost 2,000 years old. Any acquaintance with church history will tell us that we have had our high points and low points. In my humble opinion this is for the most part a good time in our church's history. Vatican Council II (1962-65) paved the way for much change and renewal in the church.

Recently, I came across a *Catholic Update* called *Seven Key Trends in the Church Today* by Fr. Jack Wintz, O.F.M. I was surprised when I saw that this particular *Update* was written ten years ago. Nevertheless, I believe that the seven key trends identified by Fr. Wintz are still very relevant today. The following are a summary of the seven trends. The excerpts will be in italics. I will add a comment after each trend.

1. Lay Ministry Explosion

A familiar scene today in Catholic parishes is that of lay women and men gathered around the altar at Communion time as Eucharistic ministers. Also observable at Mass are other lay ministers—servers, lectors, and music ministers.

These very visible liturgical ministers are but a reminder of the even wider variety of lay men and women who minister and serve the Church as catechists, youth ministers, hospital chaplains, members of bereavement committees, lay administrators of priestless parishes, outreach workers distributing food to the poor.

Behind this multiplication of lay ministries within the Church is the growing awareness that all Catholics are called by their Baptism to engage in ministry or service to the Catholic community and, indeed, to the world at large.

Comment: As I ponder the large number of people actively involved in ministry today in our parish, I can only praise God—in ministry inside and outside the parish. If you are not active in a ministry and would like to be, please contact me or one of our pastoral team at the parish office.

2. Enriched Liturgies

In the era before Vatican II, the priest celebrated the Mass in Latin. For the most part, his back was to the people and the altar seemed far away. Although the style of liturgy

conveyed a rich sense of awe then, it was easier for the faithful to fall into the role of silent spectators.

Now it is much easier for the assembly to be more actively engaged and to see that "all of us" are truly celebrating the Eucharist along with the priest.

Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy supported this development, urging "that all the faithful be led to ...full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations" (#14).

Following the lead of Vatican II, the Church has also been stressing the communal dimension of the sacraments, seeing them not as private rituals but as "community events."

Comment: Another wonderful piece of liturgical renewal is the revised RCIA Rite which enables us to welcome inquirers into our church in a step-by-step ritual process. While there is always room for the improvement of our liturgies, including the homilies, I think we do a pretty good job at fostering prayerful and engaging liturgies. A big 'Thank You' to Mary Birmingham and her Liturgical Committee. I am also most grateful to those of you who have leadership roles in our weekly liturgies.

3. Deeper love of Scripture

More Catholics are reading the Bible today—and with a more solid understanding—than any other time in its 2000-year history. More educated in general, the laity are getting a deeper grounding in Scripture. Lay women and men in growing numbers are attending theology schools, joining Scripture study groups or reading an ever-expanding array of good articles or books on the subject. No longer are priests and religious the only scriptural experts.

As more and more Catholics are richly nourished by the life-giving word of God, they become better instruments of evangelization and of the world's transformation.

Comment: I am also very glad that this part of Vatican II renewal has also taken hold at Ascension. Deacon Michael makes sure that we have several good Bible Study groups each year. In addition, we have about 400 parishioners involved in 25 ongoing Small Christian Communities groups and 15 additional seasonal groups. Weekly they gather to read the Sunday readings and apply them to their daily lives.

4. Growing hunger for God

Despite the pervasive secularism and materialism of our times—and maybe because of them—many people today are hungering and searching for something more

profound, for something spiritual or transcendent. There is a movement toward prayer and contemplation.

Many Catholics say they have as much a need to deepen their relationship with God as to learn about a Church doctrine or point of morality or liturgical innovation. More than information about God, these Christians want an experience of God through prayer.

Comment: The growing hunger for God is a wonderful development inside and outside the church. A key role of any vibrant parish is to provide opportunities. Where that hunger can be nurtured. At Ascension we seek to foster that hunger in the following ways: CRHP weekends, Living with Christ Retreat, Small Christian Communities, Justfaith, Adoration Chapel, vibrant liturgies, RCIA, Whole Community Catechesis, the books sold after Mass, our parish library and some of my columns.

5. Broader view of salvation

One of the most warmly received notions coming out of Vatican II is that salvation is not solely concerned with the saving of souls but with the saving of the whole human person, body and soul, and all of creation as well.

We began seeing more clearly in the Gospels that Jesus' mission on this earth was not only to set the human heart free from sin, as central as that might be but also to set men and women free from disease and oppression and everything that hinders their development as human beings created by God and destined for eternal life. When we profess our belief in the resurrection of the body, this kind of integral salvation is implied.

Every authentic dimension of human existence is meant to be saved and brought to wholeness. We are to help all brothers and sisters come to their full humanity as men and women created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Christ.

Comment: Perhaps the broader view of salvation is a post Vatican II trend that the vast majority of us would not have named. Yet, it is so important. Karl Marx called religion the 'opium of the people' because in his opinion it only offered people popcorn in the sky and did little or nothing to improve the lives of people on earth. Today we are much more aware that true religion must not be only concerned about the soul but also about the whole person. For me, a broader view of salvation should also include our sense that people belonging to non-Christian religions can be saved if they sincerely follow the light of their conscience.

6. Rise of the social gospel

*In 1983 the bishops of the United States issued a pastoral letter on war and peace entitled *The Challenge of Peace*. In it they discussed the morality of war and of nuclear weapons. In 1986 they issued another major pastoral letter on the U.S. economy to help Catholics form their conscience on economic matters.*

The bishops have published many other statements touching on political and social issues. Increasingly, these

statements are being read by conscientious Catholics. When Catholic Update published condensed versions of the peace pastoral and the economic pastoral, requests poured in for more than a million extra copies in each instance. This is a clear sign that Catholics today are attuned to Catholic social teaching and to what is called the "social gospel."

Comment: it has been common to say that the *Social Teaching of the Church* is the church's best kept secret. I think it is safe to say that the social gospel secret is being released more and more. Here it is good to remember the distinction between *social action* and *social justice*. The former seeks to feed a hungry person today and every day. *Social justice* seeks to remove the causes of hunger. A famous bishop in Latin America, whose name eludes me now, used to say: "When I feed the hungry, they call me a saint. When I asked why, the hungry were hungry, they called me a communist." Mother Teresa could be the patron saint of all social action groups. Martin Luther King could be the patron saint of all involved in social justice ministry. We need both. I am most grateful to all of you who are involved in outreach ministries in our church.

7. Integration and new growth

I found it difficult to choose an excerpt from this trend. In this piece, the author speaks of a slowing down after all of the changes that occurred after Vatican II. Fr. Jack states that to some degree the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has helped to do this. The *Catechism* is one way that we can hold up a mirror before us and say: "this is who we are".

I found the point about the *Catechism* interesting because for the past six months I have been involved in writing up four page articles on Catholic belief based on the *Universal Catechism* and the *U.S. Catechism*. On Tuesday evenings a group of ladies are reading the U.S. Catechism and using my articles to grow in their understanding of our Catholic faith. A second group is about to begin. I am hoping that several others will get started soon. If you are interested in helping out with this endeavor or being a participant, contact me at the parish office. It certainly is a pastoral and catechetical dream of mine to do whatever I can to have more and more Catholics firmly rooted in what the church believes and teaches. For too long, Catholics have felt inadequate when it came to explaining what we believe and why.

Have a blessed week,

