

# Church needs to change its style, not its teachings

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The most important thing that can be done to revitalize the Catholic Church is to study what has worked and then clone it nationwide. To be explicit, in terms of getting more priests and nuns, the models we need to emulate are those dioceses and orders of nuns that are not having a problem gaining new recruits. Research done on this subject yields incontrovertible evidence: what sells is orthodoxy. Conversely, heterodoxy is a failure.

To put it differently, the key to success is to be countercultural. Forget Catholics for a moment. The Pew Research Center survey released this month shows that among Protestants, evangelicals are growing and the mainline denominations are rapidly declining.

Evangelicals are orthodox: they don't engage in social experimentation with their clergy, nor do they adopt post-modernist ideas. By contrast, the Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterians are losing numbers big time, and they are all considered quite progressive. They are – that's the problem.

The same phenomenon is true in Judaism: Orthodox Jews are the only branch that is actually growing. Conservative and Reform Jews, like the mainline Protestant denominations, are more progressive, and thus less successful.

Back to Catholics. Dioceses such as those in Lincoln, Nebraska, aren't hurting for young men to join the priesthood, and the Sisters of Life in New York City are doing just fine. Both are bastions of orthodoxy.

It isn't hard to figure out, unless one is an ideologue. Why would a young man or woman want to give up the joy of getting married and starting their own family if the religious community they join entertains ideas that are indistinguishable from the views trumpeted by the liberal establishment? Why not just become a grief counselor and get married?

Orthodoxy, like any other virtue, can be corrupted if it becomes extreme. Turning out priests and nuns who cannot engage with modern society does no one any good. I've met them: some are so uptight, or have turned completely inwards, that they cannot negotiate the real world. We need vibrant, happy, well-adjusted men and women in the seminaries and convents, not nerds.

The Catholic Church does not need to change its teachings – many of them cannot be changed anyway – it needs to change its style. Theology on Tap is a great program reaching young people in many cities and dioceses. These are gatherings in a local pub where men and women come together to listen to a speaker and have a good time. Programs like this need to be expanded.

To be successful, revitalization efforts must be grounded in truth. There are tough issues to confront, and blemishes on the Church record that need to be acknowledged. They cannot be dodged. But we must also trumpet the great strengths of Catholicism.

Regrettably, too many Catholics have no idea of the incredible contributions that the Catholic Church has made in founding the first universities, pioneering science (Galileo notwithstanding), advancing art, architecture, and music, fighting slavery, defending human rights, providing for the needy. It's hard to move forward without a grounding in history.

None of this will happen without leadership. The role of the bishops is indispensable, but it is not sufficient. Progress works best when it is locally inspired and exercised, which is why the parishes are the best venue for change.

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