

KEY TO CATHOLIC SUCCESS: KEEPING IT CLEAN

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Several years ago, a woman who was setting up a new Catholic lay group asked if it would be okay for her to attend one of our staff meetings; she admired the success of the Catholic League and wanted to learn how I handled such matters. She was told that I could not accede to her request because we don't have staff meetings (to be honest, we have a few). More important, we told her, she now knew one reason why we are a success.

Staff meetings are occasionally necessary, but when used promiscuously, they are a menace to success. Worse than meetings are committees, and worse still are subcommittees. Decision-making by committees is nothing less than an abdication of individual responsibility: if something goes wrong, everyone is to blame, which means no one is to blame. Fortunately, most Catholic institutions tend not to be top-heavy in administration, which is why they work so well.

Take the Vatican. Despite the image that the Catholic Church is run by some monstrous bureaucracy, it is actually one of the most decentralized institutions in the world. For example, the Church has 1.1 billion members being served by 2,600 Vatican employees, most of whom are lay persons. According to Rev. Thomas Williams, dean of theology at Regina Apostolarum Pontifical University in Rome, "The proportion would be like to run the federal government of the United States with 500 people." By the way, the actual number of federal employees today is 1.8 million.

Of course, most of the real work of the Church is done locally. It's our parish and diocese that most Catholics identify with, not the Vatican. As I recently told MSNBC's

Chris Matthews, though the pope is central to the life of the Catholic Church, it is nonetheless true that he no more runs the affairs of the Church in Kenya anymore than he does in Kansas. To a considerable extent, I said, the Church is on "automatic pilot." How else could a global institutions survive for 2,000 years?

One good reason why the Catholic Church is not an administrative nightmare is lack of money. Again, there is this idea that the Church is loaded with money, but as John Allen recently wrote in *All the Pope's Men*, this is a myth: "To put it bluntly, the Vatican is not rich. It has an annual operating budget of \$260 million, which would not place it on any top 500 list of major social institutions. To draw a comparison in the nonprofit sector, Harvard University has an annual operating budget of a little over \$1.3 billion."

To those who ask, "What about the Vatican's art collections?", Allen reminds us that it "has no cash value because it can never be sold or borrowed against." This is why he concludes that "the Vatican is less well-heeled than most mid-sized American colleges" (e.g., Notre Dame's budget is almost double the Vatican's).

Catholic schools are the real jewels in this regard. Run on a shoestring budget compared to public schools, they post an impressive achievement record, and nowhere is this more true than in the inner city. Again, one of the prime reasons for success is administrative leanness: the school principal enjoys a great deal of autonomy, and it is this lack of a bureaucratic structure that allows for tough decisions to be made.

The contrast with the public school system was recently brought home by Diane Ravitch, perhaps the nation's leading scholar of education. Here is how she describes what the average principal in a public school must put up with: "In every situation, the principal must take care not to violate federal laws, state laws, court decisions, consent decrees,

case law, union contracts, and chancellor's regulations." This means "850 pages of state law (in small print); 720 pages of state regulations; 15,000 formal decisions by the state commissioner of education; hundreds of pages of collective bargaining agreements; thousands of pages of federal laws affecting the schools; and thousands of pages of chancellor's regulations."

And when it comes to dealing with a disruptive student, Ravitch says the principal "must embark on a very lengthy legal process that involves multiple letters, notifications, conferences, hearings, appeals, decisions at the local level, more conferences, more hearings, more appeals, decisions at the regional level, more hearings, more appeals, and so on." And Catholic parents just need to see their child's teacher or principal.

The Catholic League, as I indicated at the beginning, is also organizationally lean. We get things done because we are driven, and because we don't farm things out to consultants. And we have no intention of ever becoming fat and lazy.