

ORTHODOXY SELLS

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Forbes magazine published an article in September about an attempt by lay Catholics to help the Church reorganize and get on firm financial ground. That's a noble goal. But when I was interviewed for the piece, I was asked whether the answer to matters like declining vocations and declining attendance at Mass could be solved via "modern management techniques." This was not the answer. I said, "we need a return to orthodoxy."

Vocations and church attendance have to do with cultural matters, not managerial ones. The way to increase the numbers is to tap into the cultural reasons why some seminaries are doing well while others are not; it also makes sense to get a profile of those Catholics who attend Mass on a weekly basis.

Regarding vocations, *Catholic World Report* published an excellent article on the subject in July. Generally speaking, the smaller dioceses tend to be doing better than the larger dioceses, and the more orthodox dioceses tend to be doing better than the more progressive ones. Regarding the latter, Charles R. Morris found the same phenomenon to be true when he wrote his 1997 book, *American Catholic*: the more progressive the diocese, the less successful they were in attracting young men to the priesthood. Not surprisingly, the same pattern is evident among religious orders of priests and nuns: the more orthodox they are, the less problem they have in garnering new recruits.

It would be hard to find a more orthodox—and courageous—bishop in the nation than Fabian Bruskewitz, the bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska. If orthodoxy sells, then he should be smiling. In fact, he's beaming: the ratio of Catholics to seminarians in Lincoln puts Bishop Bruskewitz at the top of the class—Lincoln has the best record of any diocese in the nation.

Progressive Catholics are certainly aware of such data, but it has had little effect on them. Take, for example, Peter Steinfels, the religion writer for the *New York Times*. Two years ago, he wrote a book warning that if the Church did not become more modern in its teachings, it would risk going south. This struck many orthodox Catholics as bizarre: hadn't the Church been going south for the past generation precisely because it became unhinged from its traditional moorings? So why would it want to compound the problem by going back to the same well that made us sick in the first place? Since Steinfels' book appeared, Joseph Ratzinger was named Pope Benedict XVI, thus ending the suspense about the future direction of the Catholic Church.

Regarding Mass attendance, we know from many surveys that those Catholics who attend Mass on a weekly basis tend to be the most orthodox; progressive Catholics—those who dissent from many Church teachings, especially on sexuality—generally attend Mass much less often. Which means that the bread and butter of the Catholic Church are not found among the ranks of the dissidents: the ones who pay the bills are also the most loyal to the teachings of the Magisterium.

Orthodoxy works for Protestants, too. This is what David Shiflett reports in his new book, *Why Americans are Fleeing Liberal Churches for Conservative Christianity*. The trendy churches are taking a beating: the United Churches of Christ lost approximately 15 percent of its members in the last decade; the United Methodists are down by almost 7 percent and the Episcopalians have declined by 5 percent (the drop off is even worse when the last few decades are calculated). The orthodox Christians, on the other hand, are booming: the Evangelical Free Church is up 57 percent; Conservative Christian Churches and Churches of Christ have increased by 40 percent; the Assemblies of God are up 18 percent; and the Church of God has surged by 40 percent.

Why does orthodoxy sell? Because it contrasts sharply with

moral relativism that colors the dominant culture and the pabulum served up by progressive Christians. The pursuit of Truth is what orthodoxy is all about; Christians who fancy themselves as modernists have a hard time even acknowledging the existence of Truth. In other words, there is no bright line between what progressive Christians believe and what progressive secularists believe.

Most important, orthodoxy should matter because the teachings of Christ and the Catholic Church are not mere opinions: they are the Truth. Unfortunately, there are legions of Catholics who think that to embrace orthodoxy is to surrender one's conscience. Ironically, such persons are under the illusion that their rejection of orthodoxy makes them independent thinkers, when in reality it makes them conformists.

The so-called progressives have it backwards: it takes far more guts to go against the masses than to be absorbed by them.