

# SHOULD CATHOLICISM BE RELEVANT?

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On a recent television show that I was on, one of the other guests remarked that Catholicism risked becoming obsolete because its message wasn't relevant enough to today's Catholics. I thought this was a strange comment, especially coming from a Catholic university professor. The good news is that she's wrong.

Those who say that Catholicism should become more relevant mean to say that the Church should alter its teachings to mirror contemporary public opinion. They err twice: a) the magisterium of the Church, i.e., the pope in communion with the bishops, does not and cannot come to conclusions regarding the proper teachings of the Church by consulting George Gallup, and b) if they did they'd kill the Church. Because the former is true, the latter does not apply. But let's assume that it might, just for the heck of it.

It is no secret that in the past quarter century, those religions that have lost the greatest number of members have also been those that have done their best to become "relevant." For evidence, consider the sharp decline in the mainline Protestant churches: the Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches have all taken a hit, and none more than the Episcopal; the Episcopal has also been the most successfully "relevant."

The latest data confirm these conclusions. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA has just released its 1998 yearbook. The volume lists statistics drawn from 1996, the latest year that complete data are available; it contains information on 164 U.S. churches.

The data show that the numbers posted by Roman Catholicism are the envy of other Christian churches. While two other religions witnessed higher gains than Catholicism, Churches of Christ and Latter Day Saints/Mormons, both have a base number which is a fraction of the size of the Catholic religion, making percentage increases easier to achieve. Clearly the most stunning growth occurred in the ranks of Roman Catholicism: between 1995 and 1996, membership in the Roman Catholic Church increased by 1.54%, to a record number of 61,207,914 (second to us is the Southern Baptist Convention with 15,691,964).

Numbers don't tell us everything, and indeed the case could be made that a smaller, but more unified, Catholic Church is preferable to the current state of affairs in the Church. Notwithstanding this possibility, those who instruct the Church to marry its teachings to the reigning orthodoxies of the dominant culture are simply out to lunch. Indeed, it is because the Church doesn't succumb to the lowest cultural denominator that it continues to grow. By providing eternal answers to eternal problems, the Church—in this sense—is more relevant to people's lives than virtually any other institution in society.

Let's put it this way. Those who want serious answers to serious questions don't repair to a local guru for advice, rather they confide in their parish priest. For example, if someone is given to sexual recklessness, it makes no sense to look to the Playboy Philosophy for guidance. If drinking is a curse, stopping off at Cheers for conversation won't help. If suicidal tendencies are evident, consulting Dr. Kevorkian isn't the answer. Those drawn to violence don't seek remedies by following the lead of Kung Fu and those who are depressed don't watch "Nothing Sacred" for relief. This is just common sense.

Yes, some Catholics complain about certain Church teachings. But the reason they keep coming back is because the Church

doesn't attempt to mirror the culture. In a day and age of victimhood and New Age spirituality, where "feelings" are soothed by reading the latest book on "angels," it is not surprising that millions of level-headed men and women find no solace in such soft and fuzzy responses. That is why most persons inevitably seek out answers that are as timeless as they are true. And what better place to go to than the Catholic Church?

Questioning Catholicism's relevancy, then, is downright silly. Because the problems we face today are rooted in human nature, and are therefore not dramatically different from the problems faced by our ancestors, it makes great sense to look to Catholicism; possessing, as it does, lasting answers to perennial human concerns, the Roman Catholic Church cannot help but be relevant. This may not be music to the ears of those whose idea of relevancy is a hip do-it-yourself Church, but given their own indisputable irrelevancy, who really cares?