ARE LIBERAL RELIGIONS DISAPPEARING?

The National Council of Churches recently released data in its 2010 edition of the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*. The results didn't surprise us very much.

The results are strikingly similar to the overall pattern that has been evident for many decades: the more conservative the religion on moral issues, the more it continues to grow (or lose relatively few members); and the more liberal it is, the more it declines.

The big winners as reported in this year's volume are the Roman Catholic Church, which is up by 1.5 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which grew by 1.7 percent; and the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal group, which jumped by 1.3 percent. Catholics now stand at 68 million, literally dwarfing every other religion in the nation. The big losers, as usual, are the mainline Protestant denominations.

What are we to make of this? The more "relevant" a religion tries to be, the more irrelevant it becomes. Seems like everyone save for liberals can figure this out. That's good news for the traditionalists, and lousy news for the religion-lite crowd. It's not global warming they should fear, it's their own demise.

BASEBALL AS BELLWETHER

Bill Donohue

***Kiss It Good-Bye: The Mystery, the Mormon, and the Moral of the 1960 Pittsburgh Pirates* by John Moody. Shadow Mountain, 2010. Available on Amazon.com**

It's April, and that means it's time for baseball. Fans of all teams will be drawn to John Moody's inspiring volume, and this is especially true of those from Western Pennsylvania. Moody has given us a birdseye view of the 1960 World Series that pitted the victorious Pittsburgh Pirates against the fabled New York Yankees. But this is much more than a baseball book: it is an insightful account that showcases the influential role of religion on the great American pastime.

The drama of baseball is something that has captured the imagination of journalists, social scientists, novelists and sports junkies. Moody's contribution more closely parallels the work of a social scientist: he places this premier American sport in context. While it is the 1960s World Series that is at the heart of this book, it is the run-up decade to this incredible event, namely the 1950s, that sets the tone. The Fifties was a time of relative stability, both in terms of values and lifestyle. Yes, segregation was a problem, and Moody does not neglect its role. But it was also a time when narcissism was not yet a cultural celebration.

John and I got to know one another when he was working for *Time* magazine, and I have been proud to consider him as a friend ever since. He is perhaps most well known for helping to start the Fox News Channel, and is busy today in another pioneering project at FNC. How he found the time to write this book is not certain, but my guess is that since it is a work of passion, it naturally flowed out of him. To wit: it is obvious that he wrote *Kiss It Good-Bye* as a love letter to his home town: he grew up in Bethel Park, a suburb of Pittsburgh.

While Moody's own Catholic roots shine through in the book, it is his portrait of Pirate ace Vernon Law that dominates: the pitcher's devout Mormon upbringing played an integral role in that memorable 1960 season. What Moody has done is to weave a great baseball narrative with an equally great sociological tale: baseball proves to be more than a snapshot of American culture—it proves to be a bellwether. He also offers a picture of Pittsburgh, complete with an assortment of black and white photos, that is more than a backdrop: it is the basis of this incredible chapter in American history. At bottom, Moody is not just a chronicler—he is a story teller. Naturally, he is Irish.

How did Vern Law, a Mormon farm boy from Meridian, Idaho wind up in the Steel City? Bing Crosby had something to do with it. May 20, 1948 was a day Law would never forget: it was the day he graduated from high school, got engaged, met with nine cigar-puffing baseball scouts on his front porch, and saw his mom field a phone call from Bing Crosby. The cigars were handed out to the scouts by Babe Herman, then representing the Pirates, at the behest of Crosby: the famed singer reasoned that a family like the Laws wouldn't appreciate the cigars (tobacco is a Mormon taboo), thus making them ill-disposed to having their son sign with their teams. But the Laws liked Herman—he brought Mrs. Law flowers and chocolates. All that was left was the phone call. When Mrs. Law spoke to her hero, Bing, it made his job of inducing the Laws to persuade their son to sign with the Pirates that much easier.

Law was known to his teammates at "The Deacon," and he clearly embodied many virtues. It wasn't just cigarettes (popular with players in those days) that the 6'3" Mormon shunned, he followed his religion by rejecting alcohol, drugs and promiscuity. Reared with a deep sense of service, he not only gave ten percent of his income in the form of a "full tithe" to his religion, he gave of his time; his voluntarism benefited many. While as a Mormon he stood out from the other

players, he was able to live the American dream of being judged by his performance, not his acquired social attributes.

Law's religion proved controlling, in the best sense of that word. "I prayed for strength. I prayed that I would do my best. I prayed that no one would be hurt in the game. Just praying to win would have been selfish." If someone did get hurt in the game, it wasn't because he willed it: Law never tried to "get even" by hitting a batter. His sentiments seem quaint today, especially in an era where the only thing embarrassing about steroid use is being caught.

Law put demands on himself that are all but unthinkable in today's game of baseball. He faithfully tried to orient his behavior toward six rules that he penned. "I will never criticize my superiors. I will never insist I am right to the extent of angering others. I will never raise my voice or engage in heated argument. I will never forget that I am one of God's marked men. I will always remember I am made of the same stuff as the worst sinner. I will always have a smile for everyone, especially those who like me least." This was a tall order, but it gave Law something to aim at besides throwing strikes.

Others took notice of Law's demeanor. Moody relates a great story—all but unimaginable today—of the time when "The Deacon" was thrown out of a game. Law did not so much as protest the umpire's decision as he did express bewilderment. "Stan, why are you throwing me out? I haven't been swearing at you." What he failed to realize was that the umpire was just being avuncular. "I threw Law out of the game because I knew he's a minister of some kind and there was a lot of abusive language on the bench, and I didn't want him to hear it. So I threw him out." It is inconceivable that an ump would ever do that today, and if he did, he'd be the one thrown out of the game.

Law's reputation as a honest broker was lost on no one, though some tried to make him bend. There was the night in

Philadelphia when one of his teammates, who shared an adjoining room, bet a young woman that if she showed up by his bed, he would decline the invitation. The woman lost $50. Then there was the time when an ad agency for Marlboro asked Law to endorse the brand. It mattered not a whit to the company that he didn't smoke, all they wanted from him was an endorsement. "With my association with the Church," he said, "and with the standards I think athletes ought to maintain, I'm sorry I can't endorse your product." Today athletes wear multiple product logos on their uniforms, getting paid a small fortune for doing so. Indeed, it would be headline news if an offer were rebuffed.

Moody touches on how and why baseball changed. If the Sixties started where the Fifties left off, by the end of the decade it was evident that the Sixties signaled radical individualism. It was at that time that baseball owners yielded to the players' union by instituting free agency. Curt Flood, an infielder for the St. Louis Cardinals, refused to be traded to Philadelphia, claiming he was not chattel. While it was a clear win for individual rights, it was also a sure loss for team cohesion, player loyalty and fan appreciation. Moreover, it was also a huge win for teams in big cities with lucrative television contracts (e.g., the Yankees) and a severe blow to teams in smaller markets (the Pirates). In other words, it was a bellwether of cultural excesses to come.

Vernon Law imbued traditional moral values that not only made him a great man, it made him a great athlete. In a day when middle relievers rescue starting pitchers after five innings of work, Law's accomplishments seem inhuman. He would pitch 18 innings (giving up two runs) and then hurl another 13 innings four days later. There is no doubt that Law held the keys to that classic 1960 season. In the mid-1950s, the Pirates finished at the bottom, or near the bottom, every year. "Pittsburgh stank," writes Moody. But that was about to change.

Before the first pitch was thrown in the World Series, the bookies in Las Vegas gave the Pirates a 1 in 15 chance of beating the Yankees. The Yanks were loaded with power: Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Bill Skowron, Yogi Berra. And they had Whitey Ford on the mound. But Pittsburgh was not without talent. Besides, Law, there was Harvey Haddix, Dick Groat, Roberto Clemente, and Bill Mazeroski. The Yankees had Casey Stengel, a bit of a grump, orchestrating the team, and the Pirates were blessed with Danny Murtaugh, the smiling Irishman.

Law had a 20-9 season and performed well in the World Series, despite being injured. The ankle injury that Law endured came in the clubhouse after winning the pennant. The catcher, Bob Oldis, was so excited he pulled a shoe off of Law's foot, resulting in a sprain. While that was an accident, what precipitated the incident was another inadvertent moment. Bob "The Gunner" Prince, the voice of the Pirates, got everyone so jacked up that the atmospherics proved combustible. Prince was known for his antics, and for his indomitable delivery every time a Pirate homered—"You can kiss it good-bye!"

Prince, of course, would have much to cheer about when Mazeroski hit his famous home run in Game 7 beating the Yankees. Maz's homer landed in Schenley Park, across from Forbes Field, and was never found. As Moody details, the nuns who taught him were delighted. Indeed, Sister Mary Raphael led her students in the rosary just before the last game. How could the Pirates lose with those odds?

When the Pirates won the Series, Pittsburgh was already in the throes of its Renaissance, led in the post-war years by Mayor David Lawrence and Richard King Mellon. The pollution that once soiled its reputation had been checked, and the transition from a steel town to a vibrant corporate center was evident. The Golden Triangle blossomed and the concentration of colleges, universities and hospitals heralded a new beginning. In short, Pittsburgh had emerged as a city to be

reckoned with. The Pirates made sure of that.

Bill Donohue is a native New Yorker who taught at La Roche College in Pittsburgh from 1977-1987, and again from 1988-1993; he spent 1987-1988 at The Heritage Foundation in D.C.