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EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

The Church and Contemporary World

For a long time, I have been worried over the Catholic Church's obvious disdain for the contemporary world. This attitude makes it difficult to respond to the interests and needs of its members and to influence the direction of modern society. It also discourages young people from becoming priests, sisters, or brothers, causing an unnecessary shortage of vocations. Even worse, many individuals and families stop attending church and lose their spiritual identity. The Church seems unfazed by this situation, continuing in its traditional ways, even faulting the laity at times for not being sufficiently faithful. The real blame, however, lies with the Church for failing to convince the world about the extraordinary message of Jesus. The Church has flourished for millennia because it has inspired the world and introduced impressive innovations to ordinary life. In the past, it was the Silicon Valley of the world. It is not now.

A recent article in the December 25, 2017 issue of AMERICA magazine succinctly summarizes the amazing history of the Catholic Church and its dynamic interpretation of Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God on earth. Taking the place of the Roman Empire, the Church unified the world, founded schools and hospitals, as missionaries still continue to do today. In fact, it was the Church that initiated the social services now provided by the government. The Church built cathedrals, repaired aqueducts and supervised the management and extension of cities. The Church also was the original sponsor of the Renaissance. The Church was involved in the world, a major catalyst of progress.

The Church in our times has lost this progressive momentum, focusing inward on institutional dogma and personal piety, even berating the world for not following its agenda. In previous eras, the popes confronted barbarian forces and saved civilization, as Leo the Great did with the Huns, but Pius XII did not do with the Nazis. The Church cannot retreat to safety if it wants to be a proponent of salvation. The role of the Church is to set the pace as, for instance Pope Francis has somewhat accomplished on climate warming. The Church needs to set more of this example and re-claim leadership on world issues. To accomplish this, the Church will have to welcome new ideas, start to say "yes" not "no," value innovation and uniqueness, learn to discourse with multiple groups, including women, encourage talent and promote on merit. In effect, it will have to change its operating culture. There are, of course, entrenched forces which will try to stymie and prevent this necessary direction. These reactionary dissonants are no friends of the Church because they hinder its ability to speak and interact with the modern world and thus fulfill its essential mission.

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