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## CHAPTER IV

# IMAGINING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN A WORLD OF SEEKERS

*STAF HELLEMANS*

### A FUTURE FOR THE MAJOR CHURCHES?

After five decades of relentless decline in most Western countries, we need to ask whether major churches will still exist in the near future. In a time of seekers, can a church appeal to major parts of the population? And, if so, how? Or, will the major churches continue to decline with the result that organized religion in the future will only be offered by small religious organizations and movements and by individual religious entrepreneurs? This is an important and complex issue that will be explored here tentatively for the case of the Catholic Church. More particularly, I will explore some crucial opportunities and threats for the Catholic Church in re-establishing itself as a major minority church. If this is possible at all, it will certainly be a new type of church and one that is no longer in a position to demand submission to a total institution. Instead, it will have to bet on the attractiveness of and free access to a religious offer which is attuned to the life projects of seekers.

The analysis will develop in three broad strokes. First, I will analyze the new context that accounts for the precarious situation which the Catholic Church and the other main churches find themselves in since the 1960s. They are squeezed between three disrupting forces. First, individual persons are no longer churchly by birth, but have become seekers who are looking for personal fulfillment in all directions. Second, the religious field has become turbulent. It has become pluralized and particularly innovative: every person can inject new forms of religiosity in the field and every form changes quickly. Third, religions as traditions and religion as a distinct field are dissolving. The main churches, with their heavy infrastructure, have difficulties, organizationally and doctrinally, adjusting to the new situation.

In the second part, I will review some of the ideas and proposals on church growth that are circulating outside Catholicism. Especially in the United States, there has been a lively discussion going on since the 1960s. It started within the evangelical wing of Protestantism with the question: Which principles and strategies should pastors and lay evangelists follow in order to expand existing congregations and successfully plant new congregations? In the 1970s, academics related to the main churches

joined the discussion. They tried to explain why some churches grew while others declined. The debate on 'church growth and decline' has continued ever since, multiplying its perspectives and spreading also to Europe. I must confess that I expected more when I started to gather material on the church growth and decline discussion in the United States. In the end, what I found was that it is almost exclusively focused on growth of local congregations, neglecting the contribution of higher church levels in multi-level churches, and neglecting also the opening up in advanced modernity of other ways of communicating religion.

The third section will be devoted to the Catholic Church. Its decline is only (a minor) part of the story. The more important part is that the Church, under the new conditions of late modernity, is forced to devise new forms. Indeed, with the passing away of ultramontane mass Catholicism, the church formation that started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the 1950s, a new Church and a new Catholicism are emerging. Which new forms are arising? And what are the demands and opportunities present in advanced modernity? Four demands/opportunities and one internal threat will be highlighted. First, I will draw some inferences of our review of the debate on church growth and decline for the renewal of the Catholic Church on the local level where the world of the parishes is in great disarray. Second, I turn to the higher, supra-local levels of the Church. As a highly visible world church, the Catholic Church has the resources to appeal, in our age, beyond its core constituency to a worldwide public. Third, and most crucially, since much of the old religious offer has lost appeal, the Catholic Church has to devise a (re)new(ed) religious offer in order to convince part of the public to connect to the Catholic Church and even to become, in one way or another, Catholic. Fourth, although tempting for the church leadership, it is important not to reduce Catholicism to the Catholic Church and to establish a fruitful relation between the institutional church and a wider Catholic milieu. Finally, it will be essential to avoid a standstill between conservative and liberal Catholics. The failure to find a way forward 'beyond conservatism and liberalism' in the 1960s and 1970s explains much of why the Church has been in crisis and devolution since 1960. The overview already shows that becoming a new major minority church, a church with a small direct constituency yet with a large outward appeal, will not be easy. The opposite outcome, which is equally if not more likely, would be the withdrawal into a sectarian remnant of a once major church.

## A WORLD OF SEEKERS

### *From Believers to Seekers*

In the past decades, the relationship between the Catholic Church and its following has changed beyond recognition.

First of all, as has been touched upon already by many authors,<sup>1</sup> religion has become an individual option, an act of choice. Consequently, the relation between church and following has been reversed. While the Catholic Church institution could use state power before 1800 and informal power in the Catholic milieu after 1800 to force people to submit, to some degree, to the Catholic Church, people nowadays take a far more autonomous stance vis-à-vis the Church. They are now free to accept or reject what is presented.

Second, although some are embracing the Church's teachings with gusto, most people now view the Church's rulings and activities with reserve. In a strict sense, there is no Catholic following – people who merely follow – anymore, no total membership 'from cradle to grave', only a public with different degrees of attention and commitment.

Third, the new situation has put an end to the antagonism, so pervasive in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, between two power blocs: a deferent, sympathizing church following, on the one hand, and a distant, even hostile conglomerate of outsiders, on the other hand. Many outsiders are now sometimes willing to lend a favorable ear to the Church. All can become, in principle, interested, but there is, at the same time, no guarantee that those having stepped in will remain. The constitution of a worldwide public – "the whole world is watching" – has become a reality, as both the enthusiasm around the Second Vatican Council and the scandals of child abuse by priests have shown.

Fourth, entry into the Church by individual decision rather than by birth changes the very way not only how one is becoming Catholic, but also what it is all about. Becoming Catholic by birth in the past meant that one was raised in a Catholic state and society (prior to 1789) or in a Catholic sub-society (between 1789 and 1960). Church and (sub)-society, in which one was born, took precedence. However, becoming Catholic by individual decision means that the individual 'human condition' becomes the alpha and omega on which religious, in this case Catholic, commitment is based. Hence, personal identity and fulfilment constitute the frame for religious activity. It is anchored in the life of the individual person and in his/her life-world, and is thus extraneous to the Church and its world.

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<sup>1</sup> See a.o.: Hans Joas, *Glaube als Option: Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2012).

Fifth, this change of framework in handling religion not only has consequences for the Catholic Church – the issue will be at the center of attention in the third section – but also for the individual person. By moving the frame of lived religion out of the Church to the individual person, i.e., the process of individualization, one not only gets more freedom to choose a religion, to select in a religion what one likes and doesn't like and, eventually, to quit as one pleases; one also loses, at the same time, the safe, if at times dull and oppressive, anchor of the Church and the Catholic world. One becomes, generically speaking, a seeker. In principle, seeking never stops. To be sure, there are a lot of pragmatic stops, e.g., indifference to religion, having close friends in a congregation, becoming less motivated to switch or quit as one ages. Yet, many churched believers also sense a kind of homelessness. The new basic condition is, socially, one of 'longing without belonging', one without unqualified identification<sup>2</sup> and, temporally, one of longing without definite end.

Sixth, seeking is here interpreted as a universal and characteristic feature of most human beings in our time. It is, of course, also interesting to analyze seekers as a specific category, as non-churched religious people opposed to the churched dwellers<sup>3</sup> (see the chapters by Halman and de Hart and Dekker). Yet, I want to stress the common ground of both categories: most of the churched believers have become seekers no less than those seeking at the margins of or outside organized religion (see the chapters by de Hart and Dekker and de Groot and Pieper). We live nowadays in a world of seekers.

*From Monopoly/Oligopoly to a Turbulent Religious Field*

It is not only the religious person who has changed. The religious field in which the Catholic Church and Catholicism are operating has also changed. Since Roman times, Christianity had a monopoly in Europe and in Byzantium – only Judaism survived at great costs. After the Reformations, the monopolies were continued in a confessional garb. Only in some Protestant countries like the Dutch Republic, Great Britain, and the Anglo-Saxon immigration lands were minor churches and sects allowed to exist. The separation of church and state after 1789 didn't, at first, revolutionize the religious field. Until about 1960, with the exception of the United States and to a lesser extent Australia and Canada, church

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<sup>2</sup> Staf Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism against Modernity' to the Problematic 'Modernity of Catholicism'," *Ethical Perspectives* 8, 2 (2001), p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> See: Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven. Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

monopolies and oligopolies remained in place, the biggest innovation being the slow increase of the non-churched.

It is only after 1960 that the make-up of the religious field begins to change drastically and in an epochal way. First, in the sphere of heavily institutionalized religion, a shift is occurring from main churches to smaller churches and sects. The main churches are declining and, at the same time, the foundation and prospering of new religious groups has never been easier. As a result, the number of small churches and sects is ever increasing. Second, religions with less institutional armor have also appeared on the scene. There is an ever-growing number of so-called 'new religious movements', most of them Christian, but also genuine new ones in the wake of New Age or neo-paganism. Third, all major religions of the world have taken hold in the West, not only direct transplantations (like Islam or Tibetan Buddhism), but also altered forms (like 'Western Buddhism'). Fourth, the stamina of innovation in the religious field would be greatly underestimated if one is merely considering the collective level, the multiplication of religious organizations and movements. Pluralization is accelerating by individual innovation. A growing number of freewheeling religious writers and coaches are vying for attention. Moreover, every individual who imagines receiving a calling can, in principle, start a new religious undertaking. A modicum of personal charisma and endurance capabilities is all that is needed. And every individual who joins a new undertaking does it on his/her own terms and with his/her personal agenda in mind, thereby contributing to the innovation. Indeed, many religious entrepreneurs have a prior history of joining and leaving.

From a seemingly 'steady state' quality prior to 1960 – only to be questioned in times of upheaval – the religious field has evolved into a turbulent field. Increasing pluralization means also increasing competition between and higher volatility of churches, sects, movements, and individual entrepreneurs. Permanent innovation results in obsolescence of old forms and habits, but also in the rediscovery of forgotten traditions, indeed, in innovating from traditions.<sup>4</sup> Religions have lost much of their seemingly perennial aura and are now looked upon as equally precarious as all other mundane phenomena. Last but not least, the religious field and religions seem to be dissolving.

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<sup>4</sup> William Arfman, "Innovating from Traditions: The Emergence of a Ritual Field of Collective Commemoration in the Netherlands," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, 1 (2014), pp. 17-32.

*Dissolving Religion(s)*

The dissolution is at work on two levels. Religions are dissolving, becoming less identifiable and, hence, the former clear structuring of the religious field into distinct religions is receding. Second, the religious field as a whole is in the process of being included into a wider field of well-being, happiness, and consumption.

*Dissolving Religions.* In the past, the alliance of the elites of universalistic religions with the political elites in agrarian empires had boosted these religions institutionally and geographically. With the coming of modernity, these religions became even more organized. They were differentiated from their societal surroundings, above all from politics, and became more distinct from one another. At the same time, they became part of a worldwide religious field. Thus, they increasingly came to be regarded first in the West, beginning after 1500, then after 1800 in the rest of the world, as ‘religions’ and as distinct religions.<sup>5</sup>

This centuries-long trend towards better and more distinct institutionalization is pushed into reverse since the 1960s. A process of de-institutionalization and de-differentiation is taking place. The religions with the strongest organizations – the main churches – are generally in decline. Many of the newer ones, like the ‘new religious movements’ and, obviously, individual religious entrepreneurs, refrain from heavy institutionalization. A case in point is the major restructuring going on within Protestantism. The ever-growing number of Protestant churches, in particular the rise of small groups mostly in the Evangelical and Pentecostal realm, and of non-denominational congregations, makes it less clear which beliefs and practices are hidden beneath the label of Protestantism. In another way, this dissolving tendency is also at work within Western Buddhism. It is constituted by organizations and groups with widely different contents and practices, many of which are only faintly referring to Buddhist traditions. Not all denominations and religions are equally prone to dissolution as the examples given. Nevertheless, if this trend continues, the overall outcome in the future could well be a dissolution of the former religions into a religious ‘mouvance’ with few clearing posts.

*Dissolving Religion.* Occurring simultaneously with the first tendency is an even greater rupture with the past: the dissolution of the religious field into a wider field of well-being, happiness, and consumption. Of course, the borders between the religious sphere and other spheres of life have

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Beyer, *Religions in Global Society* (London-New York: Routledge, 2006).

never been sharp. Thanks to improving institutionalization and increasing differentiation, those borders became in modernity somewhat more pronounced. However, this trend is being reversed after 1960.

- Institutions function as markers of a sphere in society (e.g., elections, political parties, and parliament for the polity, companies, and markets for the economy). When institutions fade, the identity of the sphere or subsystem in question equally fades. The weakening of religious institutions, especially of the main churches, thus makes for a more diffuse identity of religion as a distinct field.

- The identification of a distinctive religious field – religion – is further weakened by the normative uplifting of individual religious beliefs and practices. They are now seen as primary above the institutional level. Yet, the individual life-world is never as clearly divided between distinctive provinces as is the world of institutions.

- Whereas previously religions were performing or helping to perform a lot of roles and functions in other spheres of life – e.g., the Catholic Church supporting a Catholic political party or trade union – this is less the case today. Instead, other spheres of life are now performing religious or quasi-religious functions (e.g., psychological coaching of life, art as religion, philosophers promoting ‘the art of living’ or ‘school for life’).<sup>6</sup> It is more than a coincidence that wellness farms are adorned with artifacts reminiscent of Eastern religions. These ‘ingressions’ weaken the position and recognizability of religion, interpreted as the quest for high transcendence.<sup>7</sup> While the number of individuals who (say they) adhere to religions is declining, the ‘non-religious’ field offering ‘(quasi-)religious’ performances is growing. In fact, using here ‘religion/religious’ as labels – or, for that matter, ‘spirituality/spiritual’ – becomes in itself problematical.

## **CHURCH GROWTH AND DECLINE**

As a consequence of the new context, organized religion, in particular the main churches, slid into a more precarious position after 1960. The decline side was taken up, above all, by secularization theory. Yet, at the same time, opportunities for reaching out beyond the time-honored fold opened up as well. So-called ‘alternative religiosity’ and ‘new religious movements’ appeared on the scene – since many of them are non-Christian and since they are only loosely structured, I will leave them aside. A number of Christian churches and sects managed to grow as well.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on ‘the School of Life’, which was founded by Alain de Botton in 2008, see <http://www.theschooloflife.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Luckmann, “Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?” *Sociological Analysis* 50, 2 (1990), pp. 127-138.



Moreover, from the 1980s onwards, megachurches made a spectacular entry. Hence, church growth became a topic as well. In Europe, for a long time, secularization and church decline seemed to be all that mattered. In the United States, from the beginning, church growth was looked upon as a possibility, especially in evangelical circles. The debates here about the factors promoting church growth triggered, in turn, a discussion about the factors causing church decline. While secularization theory focuses solely on decline and aims at a general explanation of the decline of organized religion in modernity, the discussion about church growth and decline relates more to the specific factors spurring growth or causing decline in particular churches and congregations. Since the 1960s, church growth and decline has become a huge field of debate and research in the United States, with scores of proposals and ideas going, as one can imagine, in many directions. What is most striking, however, is the almost complete absence in the discussion of the continental European churches and of the Catholic Church – at least, until recently.

#### *The Evangelical Church Growth Movement*

After trying for several decades to foster missions in India, the missiologist Donald McGavran (1897-1990) returned in the 1960s to the United States to “save souls” there. To that end, he founded the Church Growth Institute, which after a few years came to be housed at Fuller Theological Seminary. It became the training ground for thousands of missionaries and church planters and the breeding place for a plethora of authors. Thus was started what came to be known as the ‘church growth movement’. The approach of the movement is practical, methodical, managerial, marketing. They stimulate prospective church builders to look at the factors generating and at the barriers preventing church growth and, above all, to look for practical solutions attuned to the particular case. They thus provide pastors and church planters with guidelines and illustrative examples of how to found and multiply congregations. For example, since experience shows that the first members of movements are mainly family or friends of the founder, they advise deliberate harvesting on social networks. Or, because people look for religion in order to master their personal life, they recommend the church builder to tailor his/her message to the felt needs of the targeted people (‘the homogeneous unit principle’). In this manner, they combine

a conservative, strict theology with an activist and open-minded organizational strategy.<sup>8</sup>

The ‘church growth movement’, understood in the strict sense as constituted by McGavran and his followers, fell in the United States on fertile ground. The cultural revolution of the 1960s appalled conservative Christians while the conservative revival from the mid-1970s onwards gave them a boost. There were also plenty of opportunities since the religious market – people leaving, switching, or (re)joining a church – came into full swing after 1960. So the movement quickly proliferated and, inevitably, diversified into an array of different approaches. New, related movements took off and many authors joined in. They constitute what can be called the ‘church growth movement’ in a large sense. In the 1990s, a ‘church health’ movement criticized the almost obsessive focus by McGavran on numbers. They stressed instead quality criteria, such as the deepening of the relationship with Christ (‘discipleship’). The best known advocate is Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church, a megachurch in California, and author of “The Purpose Driven Church” (1995). After 2000, a so-called ‘missional church’ model was proposed by Tim Keller and Ed Stetzer. Instead of attracting people to a church, Christians – every Christian, not only professional missionaries or pastors – should take the gospel outside the church. Yet more than collective movements, the church growth movement is fuelled by scores of successful church leaders and authors who all vent their strategies for church growth.<sup>9</sup>

What to make of it?

- It is a missionary movement, fully in line with our time, passionately optimistic and activist. The proponents are, in a typical American way, entrepreneurs with a frontier spirit, believing that they can, almost from scratch but with God’s help, build up new churches that can change the world. Hence, great emphasis is laid upon the pastor as the leader of the congregation – and many seminaries for teaching and training pastors are organized.

- Although theologically conservative, they are very innovative in the institutional realm. They launched or took up a number of concepts and ideas about church work that are buzzing around nowadays in many

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<sup>8</sup> For a short overview of the movement, see: Kenneth W. Inskeep, “A Short History of Church Growth Research,” *Church & Denominational Growth. What does (and does not) cause growth or decline* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 135-148.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the names mentioned, see a.o., Peter Wagner, George Hunter, Bill Hybels, Lyle Schaller, George Barna.

circles, for example ‘church planting’, ‘cell church’ and ‘house church’, ‘seeker-sensitive church’, ‘purpose-driven church’, ‘multisite churches’.

- Standing in the traditions of the free churches, their conception of and guidelines for church growth are fully oriented towards the congregational level, neglecting the higher echelons of denomination or church.

- These are practical people. Their books read like management books, focused on the religion industry.

#### *Research on Church Growth and Decline in the Mainline Churches*

After the start by the church practitioners of the ‘church growth movement’, social scientists with links to the mainline churches in the US – Catholic and Protestant – joined the discussion in the 1970s. They took a more analytical stance and were not only interested in church growth, but also in church decline, not surprisingly given the decline of most mainline churches at the time. Most important here are Dean Hoge and David Roozen. Together, they edited in 1979 the highly influential book “Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950-1978.” David Roozen, now with Kirk Hadaway, edited in 1993 another influential book, “Church & Denominational Growth.”

Against the activist overtones in the church growth movement and in the ‘strict church’-theory (cf. *infra*), they made a useful distinction between contextual factors, which are beyond the reach of churches, and institutional factors, which can be manipulated by the churches. They demonstrated the crucial importance of contextual factors, like birth rates, population growth, and value change. According to them, it is, in particular, the low and declining birthrate of the white and highly educated constitution of the US mainline churches that explains the decline of these denominations. Nonetheless, they agree with the church growth movement that decline is not only the inexorable result of fate. Institutional factors like denominational tradition, distribution of resources and, above all, rate of commitment and evangelistic effort are crucial in making and keeping congregations vibrant. Furthermore, they demonstrated that there are, even in declining denominations, a number of congregations that grow, with the stated hope that these can show the way for re-launching growth in the non-growing congregations of the denomination. In a sense, then, one can say that Hoge, Roozen, Hadaway, and the like uploaded the church growth issue scientifically into a subject of academic research and, in doing so, they translated and amended ideas of the church growth movement for use in mainline religions.

The debate about church growth and decline in the US is slowly beginning to trickle down to Europe, for example, marginally in the

Netherlands<sup>10</sup> and in Germany and Switzerland,<sup>11</sup> and more prominently in the Church of England through its Evangelical wing and through its links with its sister church, the Episcopal Church in the US. Initiatives were already taken in the 1990s and again after 2000.<sup>12</sup> From 2011 to 2013, in a collaborative effort of academic social scientists and church professionals, a large-scale ‘church growth research programme’ was conducted, the results of which are now becoming published.<sup>13</sup> As the American mainline denominations, the Church of England, although on the whole declining, presents in the decade up to 2010 also congregations that grow – 16% of the congregations, mostly new and (sub)-urban ones – as against 67% that remained more or less stable and 16% declining.<sup>14</sup> In their statistical trend report, the researchers Voas and Watts advise, in the first place, to try to retain children of parent members as being critical for church growth because it is a large group and because they are within easier reach than the non-churched.<sup>15</sup> They also conclude that “active and able lay involvement is crucial”<sup>16</sup> – there are simply not enough professionals. The growth research program, moreover, singles out for growth, in addition to existing congregations and new church plants – the usual suspects for church growth – so-called ‘fresh expressions’ (the Anglican label for experimental initiatives of all sorts) and cathedrals and old churches as special locations. In the UK at least, there seems to be a growing interest in church growth.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rein Brouwer et al., *Levend lichaam: Dynamiek van christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen in Nederland* (Kampen: Kok, 2007); Alrik Vos and Stefan Paas, “Nieuwe kerkvorming als kwantitatieve groeistrategie,” *Religie & Samenleving* 8, 2 (2013), pp. 265-288.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Kulcsar, *Der erlebnisorientierte geistliche Lebensstil als Herausforderung für den Gemeindeaufbau in der Postmoderne. Empirische Untersuchung der Auswirkungen der church growth movement auf den Gemeindeaufbau in Deutschland und in der Schweiz*. PhD-thesis. University of South Africa, 2010 (retrieved at 17 April 2014 from [http://uir.unsa.qc.za/bitstream/handle/10500/3845/thesis\\_kulcsar\\_b.pdf](http://uir.unsa.qc.za/bitstream/handle/10500/3845/thesis_kulcsar_b.pdf)).

<sup>12</sup> See: Church of England, *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994); Church of England, *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk>

<sup>14</sup> David Voas and Laura Watt, *Numerical change in church attendance: national, local and individual factors*. The Church Growth Research Programme. Report on Strand 1 and 2, 2014, p. 6 (retrieved at 14 April 2014 from [http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/Report\\_-\\_Strands\\_1\\_2\\_rev2.pdf](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/Report_-_Strands_1_2_rev2.pdf)).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> See recently, e.g., Helen Cameron, *Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches* (London: SCM Press, 2010); James Sweeney,

*The 'Strict Church'-Perspective of the Rational Choice Theory*

Let us go back to the discussion in the United States. The theoretically most elaborated approach about the present position and future prospects of churches was presented in the 1980s and 1990s by the rational choice theorists of religion William Sims Bainbridge, Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Lawrence Iannaccone. They draw their inspiration from a thesis that was first forcefully put forward by Dean Kelley in 1972: conservative – ‘strict’ – denominations outperform liberal, mainline denominations in terms of denominational growth.<sup>18</sup> According to Chaves, conservative churches in the US grew only slightly from the 1970s to the 1990s to retain afterwards a stable share of around 30%. It is thus not a story of exuberant growth. Nevertheless, the more theologically liberal, mainline Protestant churches have been decreasing in the same amount of time by half to about 14% in 2008.<sup>19</sup> So the rational choice theorists asked themselves the question: Why are strict churches strong?<sup>20</sup>

Their answer is simple and straightforward: there is both more internal commitment and more outreaching evangelization, precisely because these are strict and demanding churches.<sup>21</sup> Zealous pastors and followers alike put more energy and time in their personal religious life and in their congregation. Uncommitted members who profit without contributing much – the so-called ‘free riders’ – are pressed to commit or to leave. Moreover, strict churches are also putting heavy emphasis on spreading the faith, on mission, and evangelization. They are, as a consequence, better able to recruit new members. The Mormons<sup>22</sup> and

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“Catholicism in Britain. A Church in Search of its Way,” *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012), pp. 147-176; and, more generally, David Goodhew, *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 81-93, esp. 85-87.

<sup>20</sup> See especially: Laurence Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99, 5 (1994), pp. 1180-1211.

<sup>21</sup> Rodney Stark, “Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11, 2 (1996), pp. 133-146.

<sup>22</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Jehovah's Witnesses<sup>23</sup> are cited as examples. "Effort pays".<sup>24</sup> On the question of why people engage so intensely in strict churches, they answer that not only the demands are higher, but the rewards are also higher. Strict churches make stronger promises about what religion can achieve for its members, on earth and after death, and they deliver more services (uplifting church services, more secular services, and more friendship contacts).

According to Stark and his associates, strict churches have won already in the past the religious competition – they grew into the main churches of today. The religious future belongs to the strict churches as well. Main churches are, in their eyes, an end station: because of their latitude no longer growing, they are poised to become smaller. Stark and Finke have applied their general scheme of upstart growth and main church paralysis also to the Catholic Church in the United States. According to them, the Catholic Church evolved in America because of its sect-like qualities, from a marginal religion around 1800 to the largest US church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the liberalization in the 1960s and 1970s, in combination with the social and cultural assimilation of the Catholics to mainstream white American culture, plunged the American Catholic Church into crisis and decline, an escape from which is not possible "unless the church is able to re-establish greater tension with its environment".<sup>26</sup> Finke and Stark do welcome the efforts by John Paul II, but since the majority of Catholics prefer lower-tension faith, they don't expect a full-scale return to high-tension religion.<sup>27</sup> Hence, their implicit conclusion is that the Catholic dynamics of earlier times will not return.<sup>28</sup>

What to make of this theory and of their policy advice?

- Let me begin with a positive appreciation. As said, the religious field after 1960 acquired all the characteristics of a turbulent and highly innovative market. The rational choice theorists give an account for the growing part that small sects and strict movements have come to occupy in this field. They show a keen sense of the dynamic nature of that religious field – they are looking for "winners and losers in our religious

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<sup>23</sup> Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone, "Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow so Rapidly: A Theoretical Application," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12, 2 (1997), pp. 133-157.

<sup>24</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith. Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 257.

<sup>25</sup> Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990*, pp. 109-144.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 255-275.

<sup>28</sup> A similar analysis of Dutch Catholicism is offered by Erik Sengers, "'Although We are Catholic, We are Dutch'. The Transition of the Dutch Catholic Church from Sect to Church as an Explanation for its Growth and Decline," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, 1 (2004), pp. 129-139.

economy”.<sup>29</sup> They highlight the choice character of contemporary religion.

- Sectarian growth, however, is a self-limiting phenomenon: only a limited number of people want so deeply a commitment. The proportion of those deeply involved varies, of course, according to circumstances. Yet it never even approaches half of the population. It is particularly small in the well-educated, existentially secure parts of the population. The prospects for sects in advanced modern societies look good, but remain limited. Maintaining high tension with society and deterring free riders is a costly business.

- The rational choice theorists are at their best when they are analyzing the growth of successful sects. However, I have not seen, so far, an analysis of the turning around of a major church in disarray into a growing sect. Finke and Stark themselves acknowledge the difficulty when they concede, in discussing the options for the Catholic Church, that even popes intent on tightening the strictures, like John Paul II, have to take the reticence of the great majority of Catholics into account. Indeed, in the past decades, Rome has tried to tighten the grip and the rules, yet without resulting in new enthusiasm, let alone a revival. The election of Pope Francis in 2013 can be seen as the recognition of this fact. In my opinion, a reversal from church to sect is not a promising policy option for big old churches like the Catholic Church. It would, instead, enshrine the downward spiral that we have been witnessing since the 1960s.

#### *The ‘Emerging Church Movement’ and the ‘Liquid Church’ Approach*

Rising around 2000 in the United States, the ‘emerging church movement’ is the latest outpouring of the church growth movement in the large sense. Its defining characteristics are a postmodern skepticism towards religious doctrine, a drive towards new and more informal styles of communion – ‘beyond church’ as a formal organization – and stress on inculturation and contextuality.<sup>30</sup> The ‘emergent church movement’ is essentially driven by a sense of discomfort and even protest against the style and organization of the evangelical establishment. It typically views society as fragmented and splintered and the reality of Christianity as ‘post-Christendom’.<sup>31</sup> It

<sup>29</sup> Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990*.

<sup>30</sup> James Bielo, “The ‘Emerging Church’ in America: Notes on the interaction of Christianities,” *Religion* 39, 3 (2009), pp. 219-232; *Ibid.*, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011); Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church. Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (London: Paternoster Press, 2005).

wants Christianity to be open, inclusive, and diverse. Christians should be concerned with the kingdom of God and not with church growth or conversion to a church: “Jesus was not a church planter,” said an interviewee.<sup>32</sup> There is thus an abhorring of formal organization and a proclivity towards experimenting with new forms. It pushes the ‘emergentists’ towards the margins and even outside the churches. Some of the forms of being church that they advocate overlap with those promoted by the church growth movement – like ‘cell churches’, ‘house churches’, ‘network churches’ and ‘multisite churches’. Yet they are also expecting much from new forms like ‘café churches’ and ‘pub churches’, ‘center-set churches’, ‘multi-sensory’ worship or prayer, ‘internet churches’, and ‘social networking churches’.

In many ways akin to the emerging church movement is the ‘liquid church’ approach that has been introduced by the Anglican practical theologian Pete Ward<sup>33</sup> and joined by, among others, Kees de Groot<sup>34</sup> in the Netherlands. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Zygmunt Baumann, these authors urge for a liquid church in a time of liquid modernity. As the solid institutions of solid modernity are everywhere on the wane and as they are replaced by lighter forms of organizations and institutions, so will small, light, and informal social forms also in the religious domain replace the older, more solid ones. The theological outlook is liberal. The focus is not on strictness and doctrine, but on the experience of the individual persons and on the ways to awake and enhance it – largely through informal gatherings and through events. The church is constituted not so much by institutional armory as by persons who are celebrating and living Christ in all its different forms. The corresponding organizational form of the church in these liquid times is a network church with fuzzy edges, ensuring a liquid flow of activities and relationships.

Again the question: What to make of it?

- The ambiance of the emerging church movement is an anti-establishment one. It is a cultural critique of self-indulgent, conservative religious America. As such, it expresses the contemporary crisis of the religious right; hence its plea for ‘deconversion’ (meaning the rejection of belonging in favor of authentic Christian experience), for a ‘deconstructed church’, for ‘generous orthodoxy’, ‘post-Christendom’, the renouncing of power and glory, and for an informal and egalitarian style of worship.

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<sup>32</sup> Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002. Edition 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Kees de Groot, “The Church in Liquid Modernity: A Sociological and Theological Exploration of a Liquid Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, 1 (2006), pp. 91-103.



- The ‘emerging church movement’ and the ‘liquid church’ approach are both fond of events. A successful event, in whatever form and in whatever place, enabling the participant to really connect to God is far more important than weekly consumption of dull or magnificent church services. There is a link here with the highly academic ‘weak theology’ and ‘event theology’.<sup>35</sup>

- Being in favor of informal settings, they have not much to say about the set-up or reform of complex, multi-level churches like the Catholic Church. They expect that in post-Christendom, Christian groupings will be small and loose.

### *Concluding Observations*

For the most part, church growth and decline is a new area of activities and research, emerging after 1960 in the new context of pluralism and competition. It expresses the society-wide ethos that almost everything in our time is changeable, even in the religious field, that sector in which, until recently, God, tradition, and established elites seemed to rule forever. It is no coincidence that the ideas and the movement originated in the United States and, specifically, in the most entrepreneurial circles of Christianity, i.e., the Evangelicals. As I remarked earlier, the absence in the debate of the Catholic Church as a whole and of the continental European Lutheran and Orthodox churches is striking. I cannot believe that this absence is solely due to my inappropriate compiling of the overview. Sticking to a monopolist view, the Catholic Church mentally still has to turn the corner.

To this very day, the Evangelicals and the Calvinist and Baptist churches in the US are framing the debate about church growth and decline. Their terminology is leading: ‘church planting’, ‘discipleship’, ‘kingdom’, etc. Their perspective on church and church growth – as the planting and multiplying of self-governing congregations – is presented as self-evident and is taking over even in the critical ‘emerging church movement’, the ‘liquid church’-perspective or the Church Growth Research Programme of the Church of England. There is no perspective developed on church growth and renewal beyond the grassroots level of the congregation or the event.

In the mainline churches in the US that embarked on church growth strategies, one is aware that each church tradition needs its own peculiar approach. For instance, in assessing its New Church Development Program, the Episcopal Church of the US concluded that the techniques and strategies that are directly emulated from the church growth

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<sup>35</sup> John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

movement don't work in the Episcopal Church, owing to the fact that it is standing in the Anglican tradition and constituted by a highly educated membership.<sup>36</sup> The relevance of ecclesial tradition and reality for envisioning the issue of church growth and decline is also true for the Catholic Church. As I voiced already, it would be disastrous for the Catholic Church to follow a policy designed for small sects and religious movements.

It is a fact, ascertained by many researchers working from divergent perspectives<sup>37</sup> that outreaching and missionary effort is the major institutional factor explaining church growth. Nevertheless, it is also a fact that organized religion on the whole has been, numerically speaking, declining for decades in Europe and in the last twenty years also in the United States.<sup>38</sup> As the Church Growth Research Programme of the Church of England is reiterating again and again, church growth policy is no panacea for undoing the precarious position of organized religion in advanced modernity.

At the start of the discussion in the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis was laid on numerical church growth. Soon, however, qualitative goals – the depth of faith, social aims, a church not being a self-serving entity – were added. In the 'emerging church movement', all is focused on the quality of the relationship and encounter. There is thus a shift away from numbers and from ecclesio-centrism. It is good to keep this in mind when discussing change and renewal in the Catholic Church.

There are few elaborated theories in the field of church growth and decline. The rational choice theorists and the group around Hoge, Roozen and Hadaway are the most interesting ones. Particularly absent are theories of major, multi-level churches like the Catholic Church.

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<sup>36</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, *New Church Development. A Research Report* (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 2001), p. 36 (retrieved at 28 June 2014 from <http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/documents/ncdreport2-pdf>).

<sup>37</sup> See e.g., Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990*; David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (eds.), *Church & Denominational Growth. What does (and does not) cause growth or decline* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> David A. Roozen, *A Decade of Change in American Congregations, 2000-2010* (Hartford: Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 2011), pp. 14-16 (retrieved at 14 April 2014 from [http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faith-communitiestoday.org/files/DecadeofChangeFinal\\_0.pdf](http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faith-communitiestoday.org/files/DecadeofChangeFinal_0.pdf)); Chaves, *American Religion*, pp. 45-54.

## THE POTENTIAL APPEAL OF A NEW CATHOLIC CHURCH

In the new context of people who have been turned into seekers and of an innovative and turbulent field with many religious and para-religious competitors, the Catholic Church will have to learn to attract people and to convince them that they can find God and lead a more fulfilled life by linking themselves, in one way or another, to the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has thus become willy-nilly one player among others in the arena of church growth and decline. The preceding section has discussed the issue of congregational growth – usually described in Catholic language as parish revitalization. In this section, I also want to look at some other church dimensions that might predispose the Catholic Church to attract seekers. But, first of all, I want to make clear that the old type of Catholicism is irrevocably gone and that dreams of upholding or regaining the pre-1960 *societas perfecta* are illusory. In advanced modernity, a new type of Catholic Church and Catholicism is taking shape.

### *A New Catholicism Emerging*

It would be wrong to consider the new context of advanced modernity as only a series of external threats – coming from both the individualized individuals and a turbulent religious and, increasingly, non-religious field – to which the Catholic Church fell victim. Like all agents in society, the Catholic Church is continually processing its environment in an active way. The processing by Catholics and the Catholic Church of the fundamental changes after 1960 thus results in newly formed activities, understandings, relations, and structures. The changes are so numerous and so vast that one can say that a new type of Catholicism, ‘choice Catholicism’, is emerging, substituting ‘ultramontane mass Catholicism’, the previous church formation in place from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>39</sup>

- In the Catholic countries, the Catholic Church enjoyed a monopoly status. Its self-image stressed even more the tradition and the divine right of being the one, true church. As a result of secularization and/or upcoming rivals, the Catholic Church is evolving towards a minority church in all countries. The self-image is changing accordingly: the conservatives are advocating a defiant counterculture, while the liberals are arguing for, among other things, ‘weak theology’ and a kenotic church (for the latter, see Bucher in this volume).

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<sup>39</sup> Staf Hellemans, “Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West,” *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity*, pp. 19-50.

- The formidable, closed Catholic sub-societies, which were set up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and which consisted of a plethora of organizations constituting a parallel Catholic world, have largely disappeared. Catholic schools, hospitals, and the like are among the heritage that is still important. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church is nowadays left predominantly with only religious means to attract believers. The Catholic milieu is now, in the first place, composed of religious associations and informal groups.

- The priests, being at the time the leaders of the Catholic world and superior to their 'flock' in terms of education and social status, have lost their ruling capacity and their superior status. Catholic priests are now few and, in the eyes of the Catholics, are no longer upheld as bearers of power, intellect, culture, and advice. They are sought mainly for their sacramental performances.

- The world of religious orders and congregations, once regarded as 'the second pillar of Christianity' (next to the diocesan clergy), is imploding and is, but only in small part, replaced by lay movements of Catholics and 'new ecclesial movements'.

- The institutional set-up of the Catholic Church is changing as well. Parishes, which for ages were the bedrock of Catholicism, are generally in trouble. Their fortune is uncertain. The diocesan level, on the other hand, is deploying more and more activities. On a global level, the Western, Romanist church has evolved into a multicultural world church.

- The turn after 1960 towards a culture of expressive individualism is resounding within Catholicism in the turn away from the ideals of asceticism and doctrinal obedience towards forms of experiential religion and wisdom theology (for the last, see Jonkers in this volume). Examples are highly visible, large-scale events (cf. the World Youth Days or papal visits) and spiritual authors, past and present, held in high esteem. The partial 'return' of rituals, processions, and candle lighting fits this trend as well.

The preceding sketch of the transition towards choice Catholicism is emphasizing more what has gone than what is coming. This is no surprise. The dismantling of ultramontane mass Catholicism may be advanced. What the settled form of the new Catholicism will eventually look like is still shrouded in clouds because it is still in the making.

#### *Parish and Grassroots Revitalization.*

The great strength of Christianity since the early Middle Ages and of Catholicism since the Reformation is the tightly woven network of well-elaborated local parishes. In the time of ultramontane mass Catholicism, they were busy centers of activities and considered to be the home for the

Catholics living within their territorial confines.<sup>40</sup> They are in great trouble now with no remedies in sight.<sup>41</sup>

Without pretending to have the solutions at hand, we can ask: What can be learned from the work and literature on church growth and decline that we reviewed in the preceding section and that focuses on the local level?

- Church growth is possible, at least for a number of parishes and local initiatives. Nevertheless, church growth initiatives in most cases do not add up to large-scale church growth. The social context after 1960 disfavors universal church involvement. The distinction between contextual and institutional factors is useful here. One cannot change the context as such – the seeking imperative,<sup>42</sup> the competitive field, the demographic situation – but one can take it up institutionally. Churches that focus on church growth are declining less.

- Church growth or, more realistically, church stabilization, does not come without effort. Growing denominations are putting much energy into church planting, church renewal, and appealing to people. They are recruiting church planters, organizing seminars to train them, providing finances and other resources. These churches, moreover, highly value church growth and church planters as essential for their being church and Christians. In short, church growth or stabilization happens only if there is a ‘church growth culture’ and an accompanying ‘church growth infrastructure’ (research and training centers, organizational and financial support from the decision making centers of the church).

- Church growth needs entrepreneurial individuals. The entrepreneurs planting new congregations in the US are mostly between 25 and 45 years old, with a peak between 35 and 39, i.e., young people, but not the youngest – some basic experience is important.<sup>43</sup> Their first job is to find lay volunteers on the spot to help them set up the (re)new(ed)

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<sup>40</sup> Yves Lambert, *Dieu change en Bretagne. La religion à Limerzel de 1900 à nos jours* (Paris: Cerf, 1985); Wilhelm Damberg and Andreas Henkelmann, “Von der Pfarrei zur Gemeinde? Entwicklungslinien lokaler Vergemeinschaftung im 20. Jahrhundert aus theologie- und kulturgeschichtlicher Perspektive,” *Gemeinde unter Druck – Suchbewegungen im weltkirchlichen Vergleich: Deutschland und die USA* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2012), pp. 49-81.

<sup>41</sup> See, however, Michael N. Ebertz, *Aufbruch in der Kirche. Anstöße für ein zukunftsfähiges Christentum* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> To paraphrase Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative. Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City: Anchor-Doubleday, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Hadaway and Marler, *New Church Development*, p. 13; C. Kirk Hadaway, *Facts on Growth 2010* (Hartford: Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 2011), p. 19 (retrieved at 14 April 2014 from <http://faithcommunities-today.org/sites/faithcommunitiestoday.org/files/FACTsonGrowth2010.pdf>).

initiative. Consequently, new church founders are few and not easy to recruit. Church growth work is demanding, exhausting, and often disappointing. The threshold can be lowered, though, by aiming at the organization of temporary events or smaller initiatives (like family meetings, city groups, café churches). Recruitment is not restricted to the few church professionals. On the contrary, all people from all walks of life are called. Involvement of non-professionals – the laity – is crucial.

- Church growth follows a logic of opportunity wherever it arises rather than a territorial logic of dividing up a territory in neatly circumscribed congregations or parishes. It is a logic of choice, leading the initiators in choosing a location and approach as well as the ‘respondents’ often willing to come from afar. Consequently, the horizontal network of analogous congregations is making way for a conglomerate of diverging initiatives – local, supra-local, generational, virtual, in churches, homes, and pubs, and so on.

- Church growth initiatives are inevitably struggling with the paradox that they are doing institutional work – church building – yet that their ultimate goal, encountering God’s presence, lies beyond the institution. The ‘church health movement’, the ‘liquid church’ approach, and the ‘emerging church movement’ are all three reactions to too great a stress on numerical and institutional growth. There is no escape from this paradox, as is well known in ecclesiology, and also in Catholic ecclesiology.<sup>44</sup>

Looking from this vantage point at the Catholic Church, and more particularly at the contemporary initiatives at parish revitalization, one tends to become pessimistic. At the moment, the Catholic Church is not ready to embark on parish revitalization and, more generally, on the promotion of a diversity of grassroots initiatives, let alone on church growth.

- Parish revitalization was a hot issue in the 1960s when liturgical renewal and, more generally, the implementation of the new church vision of Vatican II were launched. The initial enthusiasm cooled down quickly. Nowadays, in many European countries, parish revitalization has become a euphemism for the fusion of local parishes into super-parishes out of financial necessity and due to the lack of priests.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See e.g., Henk Witte, “‘Ecclesia, quid dicis de teipsa?’ Can Ecclesiology Be of Any Help to the Church to Deal with Advanced Modernity?” *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity*, pp. 121-145.

<sup>45</sup> See the special issue by the journal *Lumen Vitae: Lumen Vitae* (eds.), “Les regroupements paroissiaux: bilan et perspectives,” *Lumen Vitae* 67, 1 (2012).

- Parish restructuring is generally executed in a top-down and bureaucratic way. The process mirrors the hierarchical and clerical organization of the Catholic Church, expressed both in the concentration of decision-making and in the passive attitude of most Catholics. Although participation from local parish volunteers is sought in most dioceses, for example, in Belgium and France, the overall direction is firmly in the hands of the diocesan level. In a downsizing operation, this is perhaps inevitable. Yet, the risks of large-scale disappointment among the rank and file are great and the willingness to move to a new parish center low. The actual practice of parish restructuring is reinforcing the downward trend in the Catholic Church.

- Hence, the future of parishes doesn't look good. They will not disappear soon, yet their scope is decreasing and is now mainly consisting of offering Sunday celebrations and the 'rites de passage' and their preparation. Though important, it will not cause much inside fervor nor outside attraction. There are, nonetheless, also active and resounding parishes, sometimes attached to old churches and cathedrals provided with enough money and resources, in many cases thanks to local initiatives and/or the charisma of the local parish priest. These parishes, a limited number, are acting more and more as regional church centers.

- Many men and women are therefore looking outside their territorial parish. In Germany, pastoral initiatives geared at particular social milieus (youth, elderly, students, high culture fans, post-materialists, etc.) – what is called 'milieusensible Kirche'<sup>46</sup> – are being set up by parishes as well as by dioceses and Catholic organizations. In many parts of Europe, dioceses are taking over more and more tasks that were formerly performed at the parish level, with youth work again at the front.<sup>47</sup> Above all, numerous initiatives are taken from outside the channels of the established church, in spiritual centers, in old Catholic organizations, and in new associations, in new ecclesial movements. As in US Protestantism, a similar shift from a tight network of parishes towards a conglomerate of diverging grassroots initiatives, following a logic of opportunity, can be observed in Catholicism.

- The promotion of an encompassing 'church growth culture' and the accompanying 'church growth infrastructure' is lacking in the Catholic Church. Though the need for evangelization – the Catholic label for mission and church growth – has become more stressed in the last

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<sup>46</sup> Michael N. Ebertz and Hans G. Hunstig (eds.), *Hinaus ins Weite. Gehversuche einer milieusensiblen Kirche* (Würzburg: Echter, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Wilhelm Damberg and Staf Hellemans (eds.), *Die neue Mitte der Kirche. Der Aufstieg der intermediären Instanzen in den europäischen Großkirchen seit 1945* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2010).

decades,<sup>48</sup> in the eyes of the church hierarchy it shouldn't disturb the clerical and hierarchical order of the Church. It is true that from the days of the Early Church until the time of ultramontane mass Catholicism, mission and church growth were, in the first place, performed by priests and nuns. With time, it became also more dependent on approval by the hierarchy. This legacy and the fear for an unruly laity are still guiding the policy of the church hierarchy, clearly so in the area of parish restructuring. The handling of parish restructuring in the diocese of Poitiers and the encouragement of local initiatives by the laity as a necessary complement of parish fusions is often hailed by theologians, yet poorly imitated in the Church.<sup>49</sup> So long as the attitude persists that clerics and religious have to do the job and that nothing may escape hierarchical control, a dynamic church growth culture addressing all will fail to develop and, consequently, church growth or stabilization will continue to be a faraway dream.

*The Surplus of a Multi-Level Church: Addressing All.*

The first modernity, comprising the years between about 1800 and 1960, saw the emergence and triumph of mass organizations as quintessential actors in society. The era after 1880 has thus been termed as “organized capitalism”. After 1960, however, mass membership began to fade. This is true for the major political parties and trade unions, for the older cultural mass organizations, and, in a different vein, also for big enterprises and banks. The Catholic Church follows this trend as well. The policy of institutional uploading and the persistent endeavor to turn all Catholics into loyal members of a stringently hierarchical church institution ‘from cradle to grave’, was no longer successful after 1960. As in the non-religious organizations, there was both a drop in membership and a loosening of the membership ties. The new context of choice implied also a power reversal from clergy to seeker. The power reversal forces the Church into the position of suppliant: it has to beg for attention. The Church can no longer enforce its dogmas or norms. Instead, it has to convince, to attract, to appeal. The reconversion from an institution accustomed to deference of loyal members and the use of hard power, if need be, to one with only soft, appealing power constitutes for the Catholic Church in our time its greatest challenge. It entails two facets:

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<sup>48</sup> Jozef Wissink, “Mission and Modernity. Reflections on the Mission of the Church in Advanced-Modern Society,” *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity*, pp. 257-274.

<sup>49</sup> Nicolas de Brémond d’Ars, *Catholicisme, zones de fracture. Que devient le catholicisme en France?* (Paris: Bayard, 2010), pp. 47-67.



addressing the public at large and presenting a fitting religious offer for those potentially and really interested.

Concerning the first facet, relating to the public beyond the decreasing numbers of members – yet including the members – let me turn again to political parties. The fading of large numbers of members didn't imply the fading of political parties. Yet it altered the parties' relations with the remaining members and with the public. Political parties, like the churches, are nowadays less entrenched in political subcultures. It allows the top party level to appeal directly via the modern mass media to voters – without having to go via local barons and members as intermediaries. In good times, they can attract voters beyond their customary voter constituency. In bad times, they lose voters, even core voters, to other parties. There is more to win, yet also more to lose. There is thus, on the whole, more instability. Although fewer elements can be controlled, parties continue, of course, to try to guide and govern the new situation. They do this, generally, in three ways: by choosing appealing leaders, by crafting programs for their constituency and the general public, and by smart party communication and campaigning. I propose to look in a similar way to the Catholic Church – by now a former 'total institution' – and to its altered relation with the public (and the 'members'). Indeed, in the new situation, addressing the public in an appropriate way becomes paramount. In principle, there is now the potential to win everybody, yet also the risk of losing all. We can expect, for sure, more instability and volatility. Yet, at the same time, the Catholic Church, being a highly visible major institution and world player, has plenty of opportunities here.

- *Personnel*. As is clear by the example of Pope Francis who redressed the poor image of the Catholic Church within a year of his election, charismatic and appealing church leaders have become of the utmost importance. One needs, of course, a good combination of different types of leaders – spiritual, doctrinal, charismatic, managerial, etc. Yet, a continuing preference, as in the previous decades, for doctrinal stalwarts, no matter the costs, would curb from the outset any possible reception by a large public. Through their high visibility, popes and bishops have become, for good and for ill, exemplars of the Catholic faith.

- *Program*. Observing our life and society 'sub specie aeternitate', in the light of the eternal and compassionate God, can shed a highly relevant perspective on the world and on our problems and options. The Catholic Church has a tradition of speaking programmatically to the world, through papal and episcopal letters. There is a potential here to

elaborate and to diffuse a ‘Catholic program for advanced modernity’ to the general public.<sup>50</sup>

- *Communication.* Before 1960, most people got their information about the Catholic Church through acquaintance of local parish priests and through Catholic media. Since then, parish participation has declined and church information is now mostly tapped from non-denominational media. It is striking how many people still have an outdated image of the church (Latin masses, omnipotent priests who delve into the intimate lives of their parishioners, etc). There is thus a lot to do. In particular, the Church needs to communicate more systematically what it is offering, most of which is hardly known. Yet, an effective communication policy also means more openness on internal matters and dealing properly with scandals.

The public presence and visibility of the Church has thus become crucial. Nevertheless, churches are not political parties. They are not content with positive perceptions leading to one-off decisions – votes, church baptism, and burial – but aim, in the first place, at extended commitment by the ‘faithful’. The Catholic Church must, hence, do more than communicate well with the public. The need for grassroots initiatives, including parish revitalization, was already treated in the preceding paragraph. Furthermore, and perhaps above all, the Church needs also to make an offer that is captivating to people who want to engage in religion. Without a relevant offer, no grassroots initiative will take off and no public address will leave a mark.

*A Broad and Varied Religious Offer.*

As a consequence of the power reversal, every religious institution or group, even a once mighty one like the Catholic Church, now has to bet on the attractiveness of its religious offer. It has to convince people that religion, and more so, its religion, is needed to lead a better, more fulfilled life. Presenting a fitting and convincing religious offer has thus become decisive. In my opinion, the Catholic Church is failing in just this respect. This is the main direct cause of its decline. Between 1800 and 1960, an extensive and widely used offer for the regular faithful was present. Sacraments and sacramentals, daily prayers, fasting, devotional sodalities, dedication to a saint to which one felt particularly connected, the yearly celebration of the great religious feasts as markers of the calendar, the

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony J. Carroll, “A Catholic Program for Advanced Modernity,” *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity*, pp. 51-77; Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?,” *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 13-37.

wide-ranging field of social and cultural associations, educational opportunities, even the religious decoration of the home were all regarded as being delivered or made possible by the Church. Many of these forms have now disappeared or they have lost appeal to most Catholics. Practicing Catholics nowadays are mostly satisfied with a standard offer comprising the Eucharist and the ‘rites de passage’. That is not enough. So, the biggest challenge for the Catholic Church is to build up a new and diverse religious offer, in line with the Catholic tradition, that is relevant for the individual person to help live his or her life. The elaboration of such a new, fitting religious offer is a huge task. It is, above all, a creative task and one that cannot be promulgated from on high because it has to build upon countless experiments, mostly from below, from which a small number of successful performances can be selected for fine-tuning and wider dissemination. To be fair, there has been widespread innovation, even after the waves of innovation of the 1960s withered away (World Youth Days, new *movimenti*, spirituality centers, etc.), but this has not been enough and what has been created has only elicited limited appeal.

A strong point of a major church like the Catholic Church has always been the inclusion of different types of people and of different degrees of commitment. The Catholic religious offer has thus always been quite variegated. If the Church wants to remain a religion for all people, guaranteeing a broad offer for all will be important. The offer for outsiders and occasional participants – church tourism, candle lighting, rites de passage – is, in comparison to small churches, still impressive. It could be further strengthened by appealing personnel and an outreaching programmatic and communication policy (cf. *supra*). Yet for the regular faithful and for the would-be virtuosi, the religious offer has, in fact, declined and/or is less used than before. In many parishes, Sunday celebrations seem almost all that is left. The elaboration of a new offer, i.e., the creation of new or renewed spiritual and devotional paths that are supportive for living a fulfilled life, for the heavily interested as well as for the lukewarm, for the committed as well as for those with reservations, is thus of critical importance.

### *Renewing the Catholic Milieu*

Christianity before the Reformation era and Catholicism thereafter have always been more than the institutional Christian/Catholic Church. In reaction to the Reformation and to the threats perceived in upcoming liberalism and socialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and as a consequence of the institutional upgrading of the Church, Catholicism and church institution became more identified. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church advanced to become the hierarchical, multi-level institution we know today. But even then, the hierarchical Church and its activities were

seen as only the motor and quintessence of a whole Catholic world with its orders and congregations, its sodalities and religious associations, and, above all, its numerous educational, cultural, and social organizations. This wide-ranging Catholic world collapsed in the West after 1960, with the effect that one is even more tempted today to equate Catholicism with the Catholic Church.

The waning of the Catholic world of ultramontane mass Catholicism constitutes, obviously, a major setback for the Church. The Church was the leader of this world and thus also a leader in the nations where an extended Catholic world had been successfully built up. This has ended. But it doesn't mean that all is done now within the institutional realm of a church which is itself becoming more fragile. On the contrary, not only a new Catholic Church is emerging. A new Catholic milieu related to, yet not identical with, the institutional Catholic Church is arising as well. A number of new monastic communities have been founded. New Catholic religious associations, liberal as well as conservative, in particular the so-called 'new ecclesial movements', have proliferated. The weakening church infrastructure, i.e., the declining number of priests and the scaling up of the parishes into regional pastoral units, are opening up spaces for small-scale lay initiatives, for 'house churches' and 'cell churches', for Bible- and mystics-reading groups, for prayer and spirituality groups, for small faith-based social initiatives, and so on. Sometimes they operate under the guidance of priests; sometimes they insist consciously on their independence. To be sure, in comparison to the Catholic world in ultramontane mass Catholicism, the Catholic milieu is, as the Church, much frailer and more limited in scope and numbers. Yet, it is an important complement to the institutional church. The future of Catholicism will depend as much on the vitality of this new Catholic milieu as on that of the institutional church – and on the invigorating relationship between the two. For a start, distinguishing the Church from its surrounding milieu can help to avoid all-too-easy reductions of milieu to Church.

#### *Avoiding Polarization*

From the start of modernity, since the French Revolution, a divide has emerged between conservatism and liberalism. Of course, there are always far more ideas circulating than two grand options. The dual scheme of left and right is a shameless reduction of this diversity. Yet, it is a scheme that works in practice. As soon as a decision, even on a complicated compromise formula, has to be taken, one is forced to vote for or against. Many decisions do not wake up partisan feelings. Yet important and symbolic decisions can relatively easily become connected to grander ideological schemes (cf. the reactions to a number of

encyclicals, Vatican instructions, and condemnations of theologians and theological currents, especially since the late 1960s). Moreover, the divide is inherent to modernity because the ubiquity of change within modernity breeds more clashes over which changes are to be welcomed or even fostered and which are not. More and more decisions have to be made with, possibly, far-reaching changes in mind.

Being part of society and modernity, the religious sphere was, from the beginning, drawn into this divide. Religions not only choose sides – the Catholic Church mostly siding with conservatism – but were, at the same time, internally divided. The new situation after 1960 is also changing the ways in which the religious divide is being fought out. If anything, it has gathered more prominence, and for good reason: changes are speeding up, they are touching more issues, and they look easier to attain. This also affects the Catholic Church. Every pronouncement by the Church is nowadays regarded as a decision that could have been taken otherwise – and it is thus implicitly seen as debatable; hence the rise of publicly visible protests from all sides. It will not abate in the future. What is more, with the fading of total membership, the institutional glue is loosening at the same time. It could further the propensity of schisms – until now almost absent in the Catholic Church – especially on the conservative side because they are emphasizing doctrine and organization more than liberals do.

For the Catholic Church in our time, it would be, I think, self-destructive to envisage its future in terms of a battle between conservatives and liberals that could/should be won by either side. In the past decades, the conservatives were hegemonic in the Catholic Church. The costs are known: retrenchment into a small defensive bulwark against ‘modernity’. However, the conservative option looks attractive to some sections of Catholics: when the world is turning against the Church, one is tempted to turn against the world. The conservative option is not an obsolete option, nor an unlikely one. A liberal hegemony would also face high costs and growing discord: fierce debates and protests and potential schisms on the conservative side. Moreover, adaptation of the Catholic Church to the liberal norms and life-styles of advanced modernity is not enough to become religiously attractive. It is thus unlikely that a straightforward liberalism will fare better than conservatism.

So the question becomes: Is it possible to move beyond sheer conservatism and sheer liberalism? My intuition is that, for the future of the Catholic Church, the development of a relevant religious offer, the positive communication with the public at large, the promotion of Catholic grassroots initiatives, and the enlivenment of a (Catholic) milieu inspired by the Catholic Church will be decisive. Above all, Catholicism should be regarded as being helpful for people to reach out towards the good life. What the public is looking for is an interesting portfolio of

different avenues to live a godly – and thus rewarding – life. They are not seeking a church institution. Of course, the joint undertaking of this sort of religious innovation will not dispel the divide, but it could contain the centrifugal forces. Sociologically speaking, it will be interesting to see whether the meeting ground will be sufficient to move on together and to take hold again. Yet, this will not put an end to the precarious situation the Church and Catholicism are facing. The precarious situation is structural: in advanced modernity, major church religion is far from evident.

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