

Rolheiser: Saints for a new situation

Everywhere in church circles today you hear a lament: Our churches are emptying. We've lost our youth. This generation no longer knows or understands the classical theological language. We need to announce Jesus again, as if for the first time, but how? The church is becoming evermore marginalized.

That's the situation pretty much everywhere within the secularized world today. Why is this happening? Faith as a spent project? Secularity's adolescent grandiosity before the parent who gave it birth, Judeo-Christianity? The "buffered self" that Charles Taylor describes? Affluence? Or is the problem mainly with the churches themselves? Sexual abuse? Cover-up? Poor liturgies? Poor preaching? Churches too liberal? Churches too conservative?

I suspect it's some combination of all of these, but single out one issue here to highlight, affluence. Jesus told us that it's difficult (impossible, he says) for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. No doubt, that's a huge part of our present struggle.

We're good at being Christians when we're poor, less-educated, and on the margins of mainstream society. We've had centuries of practice at this. What we haven't had any practice at, and aren't any good at, is how to be Christians when we're affluent, sophisticated, and constitute the cultural mainstream.

So, I'm suggesting that what we need today is not so much a new pastoral approach as a new kind of saint, an individual man or woman who can model for us practically what it means to live out the Gospel in a context of affluence and secularity. Why this?

One of the lessons of history is that often genuine religious renewal, the type that actually reshapes the religious imagination, does not come from think-tanks, conferences, and church synods, but from graced individuals – saints, wild men and women who, like Saint Augustine, Saint Francis, Saint Clare, Saint Dominic, Saint Ignatius, or other such religious figures can reshape our religious imagination. They show us that the new lies elsewhere, that what needs fixing in the church will not be mended simply by patching the old.

What's needed is a new religious and ecclesial imagination. Charles Taylor, in his highly-respected study of secularity, suggests that what we're undergoing today is not so much a crisis of faith as a crisis of imagination. No Christians before us have ever lived within this kind of world.

What will this new kind of saint, this new St. Francis, look like? I honestly don't know. Neither, it seems, does anyone else. We have no answer yet, at least not one that's been able to bear much fruit in the mainstream culture.

That's not surprising. The type of imagination that reshapes history isn't

easily found. In the meantime we've come about as far as we can along the road that used to take us there, but which for many of our children no longer does.

Here's our quandary: We're better at knowing what to do once we get people into a church than we are at knowing how to get them there.

Why? Our weakness, I believe, lies not in our theological imagination where we have rich theological and biblical insights aplenty. What we lack are saints on the ground, men and women who, in a passion and fidelity that's at once radically faithful to God and fiercely empathic to our secular world, can incarnate their faith into a way of living that can show us, practically, how we can be poor and humble disciples of Jesus even as we walk in an affluent and highly secularized world.

And such new persons will appear. We've been at this spot before in history and have always found our way forward.

Every time the world believes it has buried Christ, the stone rolls back from the tomb; every time the cultural ethos declares that the churches are on an irrevocable downward slide, the Spirit intervenes and there's soon an about face; every time we despair, thinking that our age can now longer produce saints and prophets, some Augustine or Francis comes along and shows that our age, like times of old, can too produce its saints; and every time our imaginations run dry, as they have now, we find that our scriptures are still full of fresh insight.

We may lack imagination, but we don't lack hope.

Christ promised we will not be orphaned, and that promise is sure. God is still with us and our age will produce its own prophets and saints. What's asked of us in the moment is biblical patience, to wait on God.

Christianity may look tired, tried, and spent to a culture within which affluence and sophistication are its current gods, but hope is already beginning to show its face: As secularization, with its affluence and sophistication, marches unswervingly forward we're already beginning to see a number of men and women who have found ways to become post-affluent and post-sophisticated. These will be the new religious leaders who will teach us, and our children, how to live as Christians in this new situation.