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Rethinking the family on a Catholic time scale

Bishops' Synod on the Family shows that changes in church doctrine require patience and humility

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When Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, he had been a Muslim for 16 years. He was the most prominent Muslim in the United States, in fact, having turned his position in the Nation of Islam into a platform for African Americans' struggle for dignity and human rights. He thought he knew his religion pretty well — a doctrine that turned the tables on white supremacy, a basis for black power. But after arriving in Mecca, the made-in-the-U.S.A. Islam he'd known started to seem awfully small.

"There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world," he wrote. "They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and nonwhite."

Before this, Malcolm X's Islam was born and bred in the context of U.S. racism. Afterward, he discovered himself to be a member of an ancient and global religion. The Nation of Islam's teachings about white devils and black nationalism were only a small and peculiar subset in the global community of self-proclaimed Muslims.

I happen to be Catholic, not Muslim. But this month's Synod on the Family (<http://ncronline.org/feature-series/synod-family>) — a meeting where leaders of the Roman Catholic Church (<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/13/0751/03037.html>) discussed policy changes related to family life — has been a reminder that the corner of my religion I live in can seem similarly small.

The synod, held in Rome, was a historic test of how Pope Francis' more welcoming rhetoric might translate into practice. The possibility of a gentler approach toward remarried and LGBTQ Catholics certainly garnered headlines. There was reportedly discussion of doing away with dehumanizing language about homosexuality, for instance, and of helping divorced Catholics reintegrate into their churches.

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But the backlash among some powerful bishops got headlines too. The final document, a prelude to a more decisive meeting next year, is a stalemate. U.S. Catholics who were hoping for a big change from the synod are now passing around photos of Francis with his head in his hands. I suspect they'll have more disappointment in store.

The United States is a country founded in part by religious separatists — people who wanted to practice their faiths in their own ways, without carrying the burdens of the Old World. We prefer our religion to be nimble and nondenominational, able to morph its ritual and practice to the cultural moment. The biggest megachurches are those that adopt technology early and use Sunday-appropriate adaptations of popular music. Our most successful homegrown religious movements, Mormonism and Pentecostalism, both make ample provisions for changing course as the voice of God appears to suggest.

“ Even in a slow-moving church, it’s up to us to recognize and practice what justice demands in our own time and place. ”

The Catholic Church is one of the few global institutions that does not defer to the whims of whatever the cultural moment is in the United States. American Catholics might like it to be otherwise. Some want to see the church immediately embrace same-sex marriage, for instance. Others are calling for the Vatican to leap into the U.S. culture wars and declare Planned Parenthood a sworn enemy. Both goals appear narrow and parochial when we consider the kind of church we’re dealing with.

G.K. Chesterton — a sort of Christopher Hitchens, except Catholic and a century earlier — suggested that behind the church’s rigid hierarchy, it is a “democracy of the dead.” The church is not just the collared men in Rome; it is a communion of saints, living and otherwise, and is responsible to them all. Much of its past lies in Western Europe, but much of its present and future resides in South America and Africa. To be Catholic means to participate in a different way of experiencing time and space than we tend to practice in U.S. culture. It means taking change slowly and carefully, making sure that the wisdom of the dead has a chance to be heard and reflected on. One owes solidarity to ancient martyrs and to countless living souls one will never meet. Catholics must be patient, but they don’t need to wait for what comes down from on high. Even in a slow-moving church, it’s up to us to recognize and practice what justice demands in our own time and place.

Catholic citizenship doesn’t sit easily with labels such as “liberal” and “conservative.” There is no red or blue. Many saints now venerated by self-described conservative Catholics today were troublesome reformers in their time. Self-described liberals try to revive practices and teachings that go back centuries, ones the conservatives have neglected to preserve. Over the centuries the church has carried out a conversation with the world, seeking a balance between continuity and progress, between separation and engagement. It could hardly have thrived longer than just about any institution on Earth otherwise. Despite those who cling to it as forever constant, Catholicism has always adapted and evolved, while trying (and often failing) to hold Jesus’ gospel of love-unto-death at its core.

Marriage, for instance: The early church regarded it as good, but as something of an afterthought compared with celibacy. It was taken for granted. Not until more than a thousand years after Christ did marriage become — and then only gradually — established as one of the basic activities of the church.

The conversation about same-sex partnerships has hardly even begun on the Catholic time scale, and in the context of a global church. Just because some of us in certain parts of the world are sold on an idea doesn’t mean we can impose it on the whole church; that’s a habit of the church’s colonizing past that needs to be put to rest. The Roman Catholic Church has stretched over the centuries to incorporate the gifts of non-European cultures, and it still has much stretching left to do.

One of the most important features of this latest synod has been its comparative transparency; the back-and-forth on hot-button issues that have been in the news would normally take place behind closed doors. It’s a welcome sign that this slow, sprawling church is becoming something closer to a model for a global exchange of values. Doing so puts a mirror to the church’s divisions, and hopefully, like Malcolm X in Mecca, Catholics will shed some prejudices in the process. But the process matters, however many centuries it takes.

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