

Reflections

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Spiritual and Demographic Decline

In spite of this nation's movement toward becoming a secularistic-materialistic culture, the United States appears to be a generation behind Europe in banning God from public life and renouncing the religious principles that form the moral and ethical foundations of the nation. Before further rejection occurs, it is instructive to observe the effects in Europe of denying its Christian roots.

The countries of that continent, including the once fervently Catholic nations of Spain, France, Italy and Ireland, are eschewing the Faith at a rapid pace. Secularism is replacing organized religion, and a creed of personal gratification is overshadowing traditional religious beliefs. The result is a spiritual and moral vacuum. Without a higher, external purpose for life, many Europeans are focusing entirely on themselves and see nothing worth sacrificing for other than one's own well-being.

In Spain, only 14 percent of young people describe themselves as religious, abortion and gay marriage have been legalized, and divorce rates are increasing. To accommodate same-sex marriage, Spain modified its birth certificates, replacing the words father and mother with Progenitor A and Progenitor B. In 2006, arguing that chimpanzees, orangutans, and gorillas have over 96 percent of their genes in common with humans, Spain's ruling Socialist Party proposed that apes be included in "the category of persons, and that they be given the moral and legal protection that currently are only enjoyed by human beings."

In France, once known as the eldest daughter of the Catholic Church, only 12 percent of the people attend Mass on Sunday; 60 percent never or practically never do. While 60 percent of the people identify themselves as Catholic, 44 percent of the people do not believe in God. It is oxymoronic to consider oneself Catholic, or even religious, and not believe in God. In Italy, which has more Catholic churches per capita than any other country and 97 percent of the population considers itself Catholic, church attendance has fallen to 30 percent nationwide and about half of that rate in some large cities. In Ireland, where 91 percent of the country attended Mass regularly just 30 years ago, now less than half go to Mass even once a month. In Holland and Scandinavia, attendance at weekly church services is down to single digits.

The spiritual death of a society often precedes its demographic demise. Despite its current political and economic power, Europe, as Pope Benedict XVI observed, no longer offers a compelling and optimistic basis for the life of its people. There is a strong reluctance to live for tomorrow. Children, who are the future, are viewed as an obstacle to present gratification and a threat to a self-absorbed existence. They are no longer wanted. It is a demographic truism that for a nation's population to remain stable in number, each woman must bear on average 2.1 children. Ireland has a fertility rate of 1.9, Germany and Austria 1.3, France and Italy 1.2, and Spain 1.1. Spain's replacement fertility rate means that every two adults have on average one child, so that after one generation there will be half as many children as adults; after two

generation there will be one-quarter as many children as grandparents. Children at that point will be growing up without sisters or brothers, aunts or uncles.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia has a fertility rate of 6.4, Iraq 6.1, Afghanistan 6.0, Pakistan 4.9, and Iran 4.3. Large numbers of these young people are moving from their homelands into Europe. Islam is now the principal supplier of new Europeans -- and, incidentally, the second largest source of new Canadians. France's population is about 10 percent Muslim, but their ages are much younger than the non-Muslims and growing five times faster than the nominal Christian population. For those aged 20 and under, about 30 percent are Muslim, while in major urban areas they constitute about 45 percent. Islam, because of high birth rates and significant immigration, is the fastest growing religion in Europe. As a result, Muslims are exercising a noticeable and increasing effect on the political, social and religious life of Europe.

Population replenishment that is dependent upon immigration by people from other cultures will soon eliminate the collective and accumulated knowledge of a communal past. A nation that cuts itself off from the general ethical and religious forces of its own history commits suicide; it is doomed to disappear. Father Joseph Fessio, who completed his doctorate under then Cardinal Ratzinger, summarized the situation as: "Catholic Europe is dying because it has lost its soul. And it is too lost to even know that St. Benedict gave it a soul and that the new pope, Benedict XVI, is Europe's last, best hope to restore that soul."

The fertility rate in America is at the replacement level of 2.1, with that of Hispanic women at 2.8 and white, non-Hispanic women at only 1.8. America, like Europe is undergoing a demographic change. The difference is that in the United States, the Hispanic population is largely Catholic and could be a reinvigorating force for the Faith. If America is to avoid Europe's fate, it must educate everyone in this nation, the newly arrived as well as the native-born, about the principles of American democracy and revitalize the role of religion both in private life and in the nation's public sphere. The profane elements in American society must be eliminated, or at least countered with a movement to strengthen the shared moral beliefs that form the foundation of our nation. The opportunity to do so exists and the Knights of Columbus, working in collaboration with our bishops and priests, is well-suited to lead such a movement.



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