**Whatever Happened to Our Church?**

***The Clash of Sounds***

Music is our pathway to the past, they say. So let’s begin there. In 1960, even as Rock-n-Roll was rapidly gaining popularity, much of the music of the era recalled a mythical past: the days of black gospel music, cowboys longing to get back to see their girlfriends, guys on trains or planes who couldn’t wait to get back home. It seemed that music looked backwards to a gloried past with all the romantic legends, civic as well as sexual. Many of the folk songs of the period had more than just a whiff of nostalgia; they were drenched in it.

Then, a major shift occurred sometime during the mid-60s. Even after my return from Micronesia to the US, the names drifted by–Janice Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Rolling Stones, Doors–but they didn’t mean much to me at that time. The music seemed loud, insistent, even relentless. Soon we all came to realize that it wasn’t just the style of music that had changed, but also what inspired it: a social rebellion.

At first the rebellion, signaled by those early songs and other even more discordant sounds, might have been a reaction against social and national abuses: the Vietnam War, White Supremacy, and other social ills. But, in fact, the revolution was far broader than that. Increasingly, as the decade of the 60s came to a close, it was for personal freedom–the liberation of the individual. “Let me wear long hair if I want. Let me wear as little or as much as I wish. Get off my back. Let me make these decisions myself.”

At bottom, the revolution (if it can be called that) was against society itself, together with the behavioral rules and standards that threatened to strangle the individual person. “How can I possibly be myself if I am bundled in all this tight social clothing?” the freedom fighters were asking. After all, as the song goes, “I gotta be me.” John Lennon’s hit song “Imagine” was a plea for the rollback of much of what we had come to revere over the years: the nation, religion and anything else that might mobilize popular sentiment for war. If an institution can become an cause for division, let’s get rid of it, the song suggested. If this means that we have to remake our social institutions, so be it. We of this New Age can refashion society, including the family itself, to our own tastes. As a matter of fact, the experiments with communes at the time were an attempt to do just that.

***There Goes the Neighborhood!***

My own personal history, as I remember it, was filled with human figures. Even in our low-income housing project we knew the names of everyone in our section of family units, called a “court,” and the next one down, and perhaps even the one after that. The units in the housing project didn’t have porches with rocking chairs, but we did sit on the stoops and chat with the people next door. Neighbors would bring over cookies from time to time, just as my father would offer to give a haircut to any of the kids who needed one. The fellow next door, with his accordion, teamed up with my father on his violin to play Christmas carols for any who wanted to listen.

We were allowed to go out to play every afternoon without concern for our safety, since our neighborhood was an extension of home, with plenty of eyes to watch out for us. The eyes included those of the stern older women who didn’t hesitate to scold us for what they regarded as naughty behavior. They were the keepers of tradition, the old-fashioned values and behavior, just in case our parents forgot to instruct us. But they also made sure that no harm came to us. Now and then one of us would come back bruised, often enough from a fight with another kid, but none of this was life-threatening. Looking back on it, I recall that I was much more worried about being late for dinner–an obligatory event for all of us in the family–than I was about the bruises and scratches on my face.

Our own family was unusual in that it was single-parented. My mother died when the five of us boys were all very young, but the neighbors took special care of us after the tragedy. So did our extended family. After my mom’s death each of us was sent off to stay with a different family for a year until my father was able to work out a way to provide for us at home. Even when we were once again living in the housing project, aunts and uncles would drop in on weekends to pay a visit and see how we were doing. But there also those special weekends when we would head off to the home of an aunt and uncle or grandparents for a special dinner and a chance to spend time with our many cousins. We might not have lived under the same roof with the larger family, but we spent time with them regularly. They looked after us as families were supposed to.

Is this an idealized picture of times long past? We weren’t unusual as far as I could tell from the stories my classmates told me about their own families and neighborhoods. The details might differ but, on the whole, suburbanites and apartment dweller, together with us housing project kids, lived under a system with the same strong supports and effective constraints. We all enjoyed what the age of the strong family could offer.

The tight ties with the larger family may have been a cherished part of our past, but the system that provided such support for us started to unravel. Not all at once, of course, and not because of a single identifiable cause. Who knew what was responsible for the changes? The post-war employment boom? Or perhaps the mobility of the population aided by the new interstate highway system? Or could the explosion of television have been the catalyst for some of the changes?

The decline in social institutions had been in process for some time, according to authors, but it became more pronounced after the Second World War. The extended family, a holdover from rural farm society, had been dissolving for more than a century, David Brooks reminds us in his recent article in *Atlantic Monthly*. But by the 1960s, those residual features of the broader family–the sleigh ride (or car drive) to grandfather’s house for Christmas dinner, the regular visits between aunts and uncles, the readiness of relatives to step in whenever needed–were rapidly vanishing. In other words, many families could no longer count on the regular support that our own family received from relatives when we badly needed it.

***Decline of the Nuclear Family***

The nuclear family was undeniably strong in the immediate post-war years, with those old magazine photos showing a beaming family at dinner and the text glorifying those grand old family values. Indeed, Brooks regards the period 1950-1965 as the heyday of the nuclear family. But, as the climate of social trust and the strong support from the community declined, the nuclear family weakened. The daily call to family dinner was heard in fewer and fewer homes, as the ritual gatherings of the household came to an end. Even when family members gathered in the living room, they usually fell silent in front of the TV screen. There may have been other factors responsible for the changes, but the result is undeniable: even the nuclear family, the tightest social circle enveloping the individual, was breaking down. Brooks cites data that suggest that 1965 might be singled out as the turn-around year: in that year the divorce rate began to spike and the number of out-of-wedlock children began its steady rise. The former signaled serious cracks in the conventional family structure, while the latter augured the rise of a large segment of the population that wouldn’t have access to a normal family structure in the first place.

For years Americans had been shedding their extended family. Now they were also breaking the shackles of the nuclear family. We were seeing many more single-parent families because of the rising divorce rate and the sharp increase in unmarried couples “shacking up” without much shame. All this presented a challenge to the picture of the traditional family smiling at us from the pages of our favorite magazine just a few years earlier. The nuclear family was by no means dead, but it was no longer the almost universal norm. And all this is without taking into account the devastation of the family taking place within inner city black communities.

***Loss of the Safety Net***

While all this was going on, there was also a decline in the membership in voluntary organizations. My grandfather might have been a proud member of the Knights of St. John, but none of my uncles joined the organization. The Freemasons, who built and later sold off the building converted into the high school I attended, had seen their heyday long before. Even the Kiwanas, Elks and Rotary Club, together with the Scouts, found their membership continually declining. Those informal groups like canasta clubs, sewing circles, and book clubs were also vanishing. So, it wasn’t just the family dinners and the visits to grandparents that were going out of fashion, but even the nights out for bowling with a small circle of close friends, as Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, reports. More and more, it seemed, we were losing our old support systems and being left on our own.

With the shedding of these social wrappings the individual lost the safety net that had protected him in the past. Even if the mother was gone, there was always an aunt to replace her. One of the kids might have special learning problems, but there were others around who could fill in and provide the extra care needed. Also gone were the shackles of social control–unwelcome at times, but designed to protect the person from self-damage. The repeated warnings once issued by worried family members and neighbors to carefree teenagers to avoid conduct that would bring shame to everyone were quieted. The shackles went the way of the safety net. But, of course, the payoff was the freedom that the New Age young person enjoyed.

Out of this transitional time sprang the post-war generation known as Boomers–otherwise known as the ‘Me’ Generation. In the words of David Brooks, “Around 1965, a communal “we first” consciousness was replaced by an individualistic “me first” consciousness.” Social conventions of many kinds were abandoned as far too restrictive. Besides, these conventions were a product of a society that was itself judged flawed. The goal was to find and be true to oneself, sloughing off those family bonds, social conventions, and anything else that hampered the freedom of the individual. It was not the first time in history that humans worshiped at the altar of individualism, but this surge seemed far more potent than the ones we had previously experienced.

***Impact on the Church***

Against this background, another family was suffering serious disruption–the church. The fall-off in regular church attendance began, like everything else, in the early 1960s. More and more empty pews, where once sat the faithful at Sunday services, could be seen not just in Catholic churches, but in those of every denomination. Friends of mine who would not have missed Sunday mass when they were younger now confide that they might attend once a month or even less often. Then, too, there were those who dropped out completely. In 1970, 89 percent of the population identified as Christians, pewforum.org reports; now 70 percent do. During that same interval, the percentage of Catholics in America, despite the heavy influx of Latinos into the country, has dropped from 27 to 23. Meanwhile, those Americans who don’t identify with any religion–the “nones,” as they’re known–comprise 22 percent of the population. They are nearly as large a share of our population as Catholics. Everywhere we find that parishes have been closed and churches boarded up. So, it seems that we’re not only bowling alone, but worshiping alone.

In 1956, when I joined the Jesuit Order, I was but one of about 45 novices entering the New York Province that year. In fact, the number of applicants was so high that the province had to open a second novitiate upstate. Soon afterwards the long decline began. Both large novitiates closed and a single, much more modest facility was opened in Syracuse to serve not just New York but what had been two neighboring provinces as well. Today there may be just four or five novices a year entering from what once had been the New York Province.

By just about any index the church has been shrinking over the last several decades. Was this yet another effect of the social revolution of the 1960s? I can imagine hearing the lament for the dismemberment of yet another family. Not the extended family, or the nuclear family, or the neighborhood community, but the family of believers (the church). Will this social upheaval and the damage that it has brought to our beloved institutions never end? we wonder. Now it has advanced to the point where it threatens to destroy the spiritual family on which we depend for our inner life.

***An Alternative Explanation***

For some Catholics, however, the comparison with other social institutions might hold, but a different cause is assigned to the church decline. They argue that just as the social revolution of the 1960s has disfigured our social landscape, the religious revolution in the form of Vatican II has done the same to the church. As the form of our religious “family” has crumbled, we are left without the ritual practices that once sustained us. In this case it wasn’t the family dinner that was lost, but the Latin high mass and other venerable practices.

In their eyes, the damage has been even more serious: those unchanging truths, the very bedrock of our faith, have been challenged. These challenges might include the liberty taken these days in interpreting scripture, the gratuitous way in which salvation is being offered to those who don’t abide by the commandments, the facile down-scaling of what were once generally regarded as mortal sins, the dismissal of God’s judgmental role in favor of his mercy, and much more. Is this just another attempt to cater to the liberated individual? To reshape the truth to make it more palatable to the sons and daughters of the social revolution?

Just as political conservatives seem to yearn for the past (the family, community and society they knew years earlier), church conservatives seem to do the same. They sense, quite rightly, that there was something noble there. In the past we enjoyed quite the opposite of our fragmented society today, a stately structure that seemed to unify us before the age of radical individualism descended upon us. But they have no idea how to restore it, just as those lamenting the loss of the societal family don’t. Religious conservatives, in their desire to repair the unity that was lost, seem to look to uniformity as the remedy for the rabid individualism they see all around them. The Latin mass with its uniform liturgy is seized on as the symbol of the early church, with pews filled on Sundays and all the faithful deferential to church beliefs and practices alike.

***Why the Empty Pews?***

What, then, was responsible for emptying out those overflowing pews on Sunday? Impatience with conventional religious practices might have accounted for some of the departures, but there were other reasons as well. Perhaps the most important was the sudden drop of social pressure to attend mass regardless of our own preferences–a change that began at the very time that people everywhere were privileging the individual over the group. Why must I attend a religious service just because my parents and teachers want me to go? Conformity may once have been a powerful motive, but it simply didn’t count as much anymore.

Then, too, the reasons for attending church services, or even remaining a member of the church itself, lost some of its urgency as Christians began to realize that there was hope for personal salvation even outside the church. We had all paid lip service to the old dictum that maintained otherwise, but we had to stretch to find theological ways to reconcile this with our experience. We all knew good people who were not church-goers, people who were far more suited to wear a halo than we ourselves. We knew others who, because of some nasty dealings with those in authority could not bring themselves to commit to Christianity. Then there were all those who had never even heard of Jesus, much less experienced a summons to be part of his church. If these could be saved outside the church, why not me?

Those who advocate for a return to the Latin Mass and all that it symbolizes may be reacting in their own religious sphere just as others in our broader society do when they start humming the old folk songs of the 50s and 60s. If only we could return to the family as we knew it back before all the confusion, they seem to wishing.

If there’s no return to the past as we knew it, then can the family be rebuilt in some way or other, even if it doesn’t retain all the features of the family we once knew? How might this be done? Not by expecting everyone to be a member of the church, but to be sure that those who do so take to heart the church’s mission. As the Second Vatican Council made clear, the church is not the ark of salvation, but a light on the hill, It can not be understood simply as the vessel carrying the elect to salvation while the flood waters rise over the rest of the world, but as the summons to all to take note of the saving work that is going on in the world around them. It enlightens all even as it summons them.

***Reshaping of the Church***

When I joined the Jesuits in 1956, it felt like enlisting in the military. We were joining the ranks of a worldwide organization with a grand mission–nothing less than to help save the world. As in the military, I imagine, we bonded within the ranks of this religious order and found a brotherhood there. The mission was always before us–although I’d have to admit that we sometimes got lost in distractions. Now and then one of our brothers would leave our ranks and exit from the Jesuits. But the rest of us would do what any brotherhood does at such times–close ranks and forge on with our mission.

By the early 60s, though, the departures became more frequent. During my three-year teaching assignment in Chuuk in the middle of the decade, I remember comparing notes with a fellow Jesuit after the arrival of the weekly mail. Who were the latest of our class to leave the Society, we would ask one another. As the list of names grew longer with each week, we wondered what was happening back there. The numbers of those leaving included not just young men, like ourselves, but much older Jesuits–in some cases, former teachers or even superiors.

By the time I returned to the US to begin theological studies in 1966, the Vatican Council was over and many of the changes advocated by the Council were already being implemented. But still the exodus from the Jesuits continued. We weren’t the only ones experiencing the shock of mass departures from religious life, we knew. The shrinking of religious congregations seemed to be a world-wide phenomenon.

One evening, during my final year of theology, our superior gave his monthly exhortation to our community, a talk in which he highlighted the question: Are you happy in your vocation? I’ll never forget the indignant response of a young Jesuit just two years older than me as we walked out of the room. “What does happiness have to do with it?” he protested. “We have a mission to carry out and companions to support us along the way.” The superior apparently didn’t find the personal satisfaction he needed to continue, and within two years he had left the Jesuits and married. His subject, displeased at even proposing the question, remained in the Society but died an early death. Personal satisfaction, the norm that guided the priest who gave the talk and made his own life decisions accordingly, was just a secondary consideration for the young Jesuit who had objected.

The liberation of the individual–the goal of that social revolution in the 60s–had effects that went beyond the unraveling of the family. It helped reshape religious life and the church as well.

***To Briefly Summarize***

* The religious upheaval of recent decades may be linked to the social changes in American society during those years: the loosening of the family bonds as the family diminished and its form diversified over the decades. The major social changes included the loss of the old neighborhood with its face-to-face interaction and the social control it exercised. Meanwhile, those voluntary organizations that served as support groups were also weakened. Why this all happened is not entirely clear. But if this process had not been taking place over the years, it is less likely that the rise of individualism would have happened.
* From the mid-1960s, the social revolution began. This revolution was not simply about sexual behavior, or dress style or hair length, or any of the other practical issues that formed the battle-lines at that time or since. It was essentially a quest for the freedom of the individual, a quest that resulted in the founding of the “Me Generation.”
* The church, like greater society, has also suffered as a result of this revolution. Many seem to misunderstand this and attribute the perceived decline in the church to Vatican II–the loosening up of the church. Such people may err in attributing the decline of church attendance, and so much else, to Vatican II reforms, but they persist in their belief that in accommodating itself to the contemporary scene the church is only further endangering itself.
* A better explanation of what happened might be this. In the days long gone, membership in the church and attendance at Sunday mass was socially required even for those whose belief was shaky and interest was slight. Convention ruled in church circles as everywhere else. Once the social conventions were seen as expendable, half-hearted church members were free to vanish from the pews. They were socially empowered to vote with their feet.
* To expect that a return to the Latin mass and the old rites will fill the pews again seems fatuous. In order to achieve that, the old conventions would have to be restored and the traditional set of social expectations reinstalled. But there is little chance of that happening.
* Consequently, we find the same sort of division in the Catholic Church as in the national political arena. Here, too, the social revolution we’ve been through is often ignored in the conversation between the two sides. Some traditionalists hope to restore the past glories without taking any account of the social changes that occurred. Others, more reform-minded, want to propel the church forward along the lines proposed by the last Vatican Council.
* At some point the different groups–one faced backwards and the other forward–must get the conversation moving. But they will have to take into account the social developments that have already changed the landscape so greatly. As they seriously consider these, they will better appreciate the fears and the hopes of those on the other side of the table. Only when this conversation begins, at the societal level and within the church, will the necessary damage control and repair work really begin.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

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