

BOOK REVIEW

Pierre Hegy, *Wake Up, Lazarus! On Catholic Renewal*. Bloomington: iUniverse, Inc., 2011. 316 pp. Paperback. \$22.95.

Let me state up front and categorically: this is by any standard the best book on church renewal, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, and deserves to be referenced for many years to come. This judgement will be substantiated below. Pierre Hegy, who obtained his doctorate from the University of Paris with a thesis on authority in the Catholic Church after Vatican II in 1972, is professor emeritus of sociology at Adelphi University and the founder of a highly successful book review website. His earlier publications deal with post-Vatican II Catholicism and feminist thought. This volume is part of Hegy's ongoing research on the contemporary Catholic Church.

The book's provocative title refers of course to the Johannine account of the resurrection of Lazarus, but its immediate origin is due to the 'Operation Lazarus' started by the pastor Pete Chiara who in the early 1970s decided to revive his parish by declaring that 'the Church is dead.' 'Operation Lazarus' called for four evening discussions on what the parishioners themselves thought must be done to resurrect the church, and about 1200 people showed every evening. The Lazarus metaphor is particularly apt for the current state of the Roman Catholic Church in the West, including the American Catholic Church. Unless one is wilfully blind, there is no denying that as a social institution it is moribund if not dead (more on this later). Unlike Mark Twain's, its obituary is not premature. On the contrary, it is a bit too late. Like Lazarus however it can be revived. Unfortunately, not by a divine miracle and fiat, or 'cheap grace,' but only by means of a real, long-term and thoroughgoing church renewal—certainly not by restoration, or 'the reform of the reform.' But how to bring about this renewal in the Catholic Church? It is here that Hegy's book makes an enormous and unique contribution.

Most current writings advocating church reforms remain at the abstract theological level, at times with pious invocations of the Holy Spirit as the agent of change. While ecclesiology and pneumatology still furnish the foundations for church renewal, they need to be informed by accurate and up-to-date social data. With vast expertise in what he calls 'pastoral sociology,' Hegy provides in the first three chapters the 'inconvenient statistics' (the title of chapter one) and the three main reasons why Christianity in general (chapter two) and the American Catholic Church in particular (chapter three) are experiencing a catastrophic decline. Surveys after surveys have documented beyond doubt the precipitous loss of membership in mainline churches and the rapid growth of conservative Evangelical churches. With regard to the American Catholic Church it bears recalling the following data: roughly ten percent of Americans are former Catholics; one third of Americans born Catholics have left the church; almost half of these former Catholics joined Protestant, mostly Evangelical, churches. The book is replete with tables and statistics, but readers should not be daunted by them. Hegy supplies lucid and helpful summaries of the findings, and persons with scant knowledge of sociology (like me) can easily understand them.

Of great importance are the factors that Hegy derives from sociological surveys to account for the spiritual decline of American Christianity in general and of the American Catholic Church in particular. These are not music to both conservative and liberal ears alike. Contributing to the decline of the former are the retreat of religion from the public square, omnipresent consumerism, and the failure in transmitting religious and moral values in cafeteria-style religion; and to that of the latter, church-centeredness rather than Christ-centeredness, a deficient sacramental

theology and practice (emphasis on the external elements, ritualism, decline of devotions, the Eucharist as sacrifice rather than as community celebration), and the lack of a Catholic subculture. If these are the reasons for the decline of the Catholic Church, then ‘renewal is much more than the reformation of church structures and changes in priestly ordinations ... To the extent that the post-Vatican II liberal agenda concentrated on these two items, it failed and has little future—which does not make the reform of church structures any less desirable. Clearly what is needed is spiritual (*i.e.*, evangelical) renewal, not just structural reform’ (26). On the other hand, Hegy gives little comfort to conservatives since his prescriptions for church renewal are diametrically opposed to their restorationist agenda of ‘reform of the reform’ that insists on loyalty and obedience to the hierarchy, especially the pope, and total orthodoxy.

The next two chapters provide snapshots into two American flourishing Christian communities, one a non-denominational church, the other a Roman Catholic parish. The vitality of the first church is built on ‘neither doctrinal innovation nor charismatic communities ... but on assiduous prayer and a sense of mission’ (3). The Catholic parish’s vibrancy derives from its structure as ‘a community of communities’ consisting of ‘scores of small Christian communities meeting weekly’ and as ‘a community of ministries’ (3).

On the basis of these sociological studies, Hegy proposes in chapters 6 and 7 a long-term plan for renewing the Catholic Church. Chapter 6 reviews various church reform programs, from the 1992 document of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops titled *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* to the RENEW movement, Rick Warren ‘purpose-driven church,’ and the Willow Creek Community Church. From these reform initiatives Hegy lists six urgent tasks comprising his church renewal plan: end the exodus of young Catholics and the non-transmission

of values; propose paths of spiritual growth rather ideological programs; devise concrete ways for the church to be in the world but not of the world such as new forms of renunciation, rejecting consumerism, and countercultural ways of life; act as a servant church rather than a power structure; support a moral culture rather than a moral theology; and develop a celebration of sacraments as moments of spiritual transformation of the individual and the community rather than rites of passage.

A tall order indeed! But how to achieve it? In the last and most important, challenging, and insightful chapter, titled ‘Renewal for Horizon 2013,’ Hegy lays out in great detail the three steps of his plan for church renewal: moving Sunday Mass attendees from passive to active participants, helping active attendees become involved members of the parish, and leading the involved members to totally committed discipleship. If you have no time to read the entire book, read at least pp. 231-275, every single one of them, slowly and meditatively, and let Hegy’s ideas and proposals sink into you. You need not of course agree with his every thought and proposal, but do take them extremely seriously; the very life of the Catholic Church may well depend on them. First, there are detailed proposals on how to make passive attendees at Sunday Mass (including the priest himself!) into *active participants* in the celebration of the Eucharist, from beginning to end, in every single part of the Mass. Next come proposals on how to transform the active attendees at Sunday Mass into *involved members* of the local church or parish through the four forms of ministry communities, *i.e.*, worship, service, formation, and missions. Here Hegy offers extremely rich insights into the role of the choir (not performance but facilitating prayer), religious education (not information but community formation), devotions (not private piety but structured forms of discipleship), and Eucharistic spirituality. The final step is leading the involved members into *totally committed disci-*

plesh, especially through spiritual growth and missionary/evangelizing activities.

Hegy ends his book with ‘LAZARUS, WAKE UP! It happened in the past. It can happen again. *Marana-tha!*’ (275). Hope then runs through and enlivens its pages. Critical of both liberal and conservative bromides and agenda, but firmly built on social analysis, Hegy makes you *think* and question your cherished assumptions. Perusing this book made me experience again and again what Bernard

Loneragan calls ‘intellectual conversion.’ I hope it is no arrogance to say that no seminarian should be allowed to be ordained without reading—critically—this work (at least the last chapter); and for those who are already ordained—even to the episcopacy—reading it will make them take a second, long look at what they have done and what they are supposed to do to save the dying church.

—Peter C. Phan, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057

These new circumstances in the Church’s mission make us realize that, in the end, the expression ‘new evangelization’ requires finding new approaches to evangelization so as ‘to be Church’ in today’s ever-changing social and cultural situations. [...]

*According to Pope John Paul II, the ‘new evangelization’ means to remake the Christian fabric of human society and the fabric of Christian communities themselves [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (30 December 1988), 34] and to assist the Church to continue to be present ‘in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters’ [Ibid., 26] so as to animate their lives and guide them to the Kingdom to come.*

[...] The time has also come for a new evangelization in the West, where many of those baptized lead totally un-Christian lives and more and more persons maintain some links to the faith but have little or a poor knowledge of it. Oftentimes, the faith is presented in caricature or publically treated by certain cultures with indifference, if not open hostility. Now is the time for a new evangelization in the West. ‘Whole countries and nations where religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and capable of fostering a viable and working community of faith, are now put to a hard test, and in some cases, are even undergoing a radical transformation, as a result of a constant spreading of an indifference to religion, of secularism and of atheism. This particularly concerns countries and nations of the so-called First World, in which economic well-being and consumerism, even if coexistent with a tragic situation of poverty and misery, inspires and sustains a life lived ‘as if God did not exist.’ [Ibid., 34]

Christian communities ought to know how to respond with responsibility and courage to this renewal required of the Church, because of cultural and social changes. They ought to learn how to devise and implement the long process of moving to newer models, while maintaining the mandate to evangelize as a reference-point.

—Synod of Bishops, *The New Evangelisation, Lineamenta*. March 2011.