

# Saying bishops 'scared,' panelists urge laity to take lead

By Jerry Filteau

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Panelists at a recent Woodstock forum in Philadelphia urged lay Catholics to grab the reins and set the course for the church's future.

"We are becoming a do-it-yourself church" for the laity, said **Jesuit Fr. Thomas J. Reese**, one of three senior fellows of the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington who spoke at "The Future of the Church: A Woodstock Forum on Sources of Hope," held at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia Dec. 5.

## Jesuit Fr. Thomas J. Reese



The U.S. Catholic hierarchy today is fearful and defensive, a far cry from the collaborative, pastorally transformed hierarchy that emerged during and after the Second Vatican Council, said **Dolores R. Leckey**, former longtime head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Laity, Family, Women and Youth, and a noted writer on spirituality.

It's up to the laity to take responsibility for where the church goes in the years to come, Leckey, Reese, and **Fr. Raymond Kemp**, a Washington diocesan priest and director of Woodstock's "Preaching the Just Word" program, said during the two-hour session with nearly 300 Philadelphia-area Catholics. (This reporter did not attend the forum but later requested and was given access to a video recording of it.)

Reese, a political scientist, nationally known media consultant and former editor of *America*, a Jesuit-run national magazine, said, "Personally, as a social scientist, I tend to be a pessimist when looking at the church. But as a Christian, I think I have to be an optimist. That's part of our DNA as Christians. After all, our religion is based on someone who died and rose from the dead."

A recent Pew Forum study showed that about one-third of American adults who were raised Catholic are no longer Catholic, he said, and the number of priests

and religious in the U.S. church has declined dramatically, with new vocations few and far between.

“At 65, I’m considered a young priest,” he said, adding that the Catholic priesthood may be the only profession in the country today where someone who dies of old age is still considered “young.” Because of the church’s sacramental theology linked to ordination, lack of priests means lack of access to the Eucharist and other sacraments, weakening the entire institutional structure, he said.

He said that for him the most depressing finding of the Pew study was that 71 percent of former Catholics said the reason they left the church was “that my spiritual needs were not met by the church -- in other words, our fundamental product failed.”

Another major negative factor in U.S. Catholic membership trends, Reese said, is that in the United States today, many of those leaving are women.

“In the 19th century we lost men in Europe. We didn’t lose the women,” he said. “Today we’re losing women too. ... Mothers are more important to the Catholic church than priests, because they are the ones that pass the faith on to the next generation. They are the ones who teach the kids how to pray, answer their questions about God, etc. Women are absolutely essential. If we lose women, we might as well close shop. And then the worst thing about this is that the more educated a woman becomes, the more alienated she tends to become from the Catholic church.”

Reese said that for church leaders to blame the exodus of Catholics from the church on sinfulness, dissent, lack of commitment, or other factors among those who leave is ignoring a major issue. “If this was a retail outlet, we’d say we’re blaming the customers -- and that’s not a way to make your bottom line,” he said.

He said a welcoming attitude, implemented in concrete welcoming practices, is lacking in most Catholic parishes and is one of the major weaknesses in U.S. Catholic practice today.

“When was the last time you entered a Catholic church and actually were welcomed?” he asked. “Our churches and our liturgies are boring. That, I think, more than theology, is what is driving our people away from our church.

“What you need is good music, good preaching, programs for kids and a welcoming community,” he said. “If you have that, you will have a full church.”

He called the Catholic church today “a lazy monopoly” around which evangelical churches “are running circles.”

As signs of hope, he said, the church “is much better today than it was” in the 1950s, and it is a church “that always changes.”

He cited the return to biblical scholarship and spirituality among the major causes for hope in the Catholic church today.

The Catholic focus on social justice attracts young Catholics, “especially when this work is seen not just as kind of an appendix to Christianity, as being a Catholic, but is integrated into our spirituality, as part of who we are, so it becomes part of who we are as Christians -- for many young Catholics this becomes attractive,” he said.

On the church’s immediate prospects for the future, “maybe God knows what she’s doing,” he said. “If you don’t have clergy, maybe the job’s yours.”

Leckey and Kemp struck similar notes on lay responsibility for the church’s future.

Leckey, who recently completed a book, *The Laity and Christian Education*, in the Paulist Press “Rediscovering Vatican II” series, said the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s is one of the chief reasons for her hope for the future of the church.

“What happened there was a monumental conversion of consciousness” among the world’s 2,500 Catholic bishops, she said, and one key area of that was recognition of the role of the laity, by virtue of their baptism, in the church’s mission of ministry and spreading the Gospel in the world.

She contrasted the conciliar view of the laity with the prevailing preconciliar view best expressed by Pope Pius X in the early 20th century when he said, “The one duty of the laity is to allow themselves to be led like a docile flock, to follow their pastors.”

Besides re-envisioning the church as the pilgrim people of God, the council stressed the universal call to holiness and changed the ongoing narrative of the church’s life, making it more biblically and liturgically centered, she said.

Today, she noted, 85 percent of the ministers in U.S. parishes are laity, most of them women.

Kemp said a key to a hopeful future for the church is a vital parish -- a parish that welcomes people and calls on them to contribute their time and talents. He cited Old St. Patrick’s Parish in Chicago as an exemplar, saying it has some 120 peer ministry groups and attracts young adults from across the city.

Another sign of hope for the church's future in the United States, he said, is its involvement in works of charity and justice.

"We have a story to tell that attracts people who are not Catholic," he said. "Where are we? We're at the borders. Where are we? We're at the AIDS hospice in Africa. Where are we? We are the ones that are walking the undocumented through the process. Where are we? We are the ones that are in the detention centers. We're the ones that are building houses or founding houses outside the detention centers so that families can meet with their folks before they're deported. Where are we? We as a church educate, feed, house, clothe, resettle more of those who do find their way here than any other NGO [nongovernmental organization] in this country."

That is the kind of institution that attracts young people who want to make a difference in the world, he said.

During a question-and-answer session after their presentations, all three panelists stressed the need for laypeople to take the initiative if they want to see things happen in the church.

When she was asked how laypeople can engage in a dialogue with their bishops on issues that matter to them, Leckey suggested that the growing collaboration of religious and laypeople -- many religious communities have established lay associate programs -- could serve as a model and a means of developing such a dialogue.

It is difficult to get today's bishops to enter into such a dialogue because they do not trust in the laity as they did after the council, she said.

"Our bishops are scared," she said. "You don't act defensively like that unless you're scared to death. Their defenses are high. They weren't high in the days right after the council."

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]