

The Good Pastor and the Numbers Game

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Readings: Jeremiah 23.1-6; Ephesians 2.13-18; Mark 6.30-34

When Pope Francis visited the United States in 2015 there was a feature article in the *New York Times* about the state of Catholicism in the United States. The article showcased two different churches. The first church was Sacred Heart Church in Merced, California, which drew more than 5000 worshipers on a recent weekend. Many of them were Hispanic and they filled the pews, the choir loft, and the front steps. The second church was Our Lady Help of Christians in Philadelphia. This was a beautiful Gothic church built for German immigrants in 1898. Yet the school is closed and only some dozens of people attend the only Mass of the weekend.

The article went on to describe something that we are all familiar with. For instance, on the East Coast and in the Midwest many churches have far more funerals than baptisms. Churches are merging or closing. Then there is the West and the South where some churches seem to be bursting at the seams. (Even if some pastors wonder how long their luck may last.)

I am reminded of where I grew up and where I am now. I grew up in western Massachusetts, which has seen generations of decline. My once robust church is now just a shadow of its former self, and this after merging with nearby parishes. Yet the beloved pastor soldiers on day after day. Where I am now is the Bay Area of California. It is arguably one of the most secular places in the country, and yet there are parts of the region that replicate what is seen in Merced.

What seem to be the reasons for decline? Is it greater secularization? A lower birth rate? People moving out of the area? Fewer jobs? A lack of interest? The result of the sex abuse crisis? Covid? Or is it perfect storm of all of these things?

Conversely, what seem to be the reasons for growth? Is it mainly the opposite of these things? People moving into the area? Immigration? A higher birth rate? A greater appreciation of the church? A community feel? Better preaching? Or is it a combination of these things?

In a word, should pastors expect remnants or vast crowds?

How to Grow a Church

In 1970, the Protestant pastor Donald McGavran wrote *Understanding Church Growth*, which led to the church growth movement. The idea behind it was to find out what led to church growth and what were the barriers to church growth. The movement basically used market research in order find the answers to these questions. Other disciples of the movement were Peter Wagner and Ralph Winter. Over the decades, the principles of the movement led to the massive growth of megachurches. It is also possible that what led to the church growth movement in the first place was evidence of decline in the mainstream churches after the 1950s. Was there some kind of science that could arrest and even reverse this decline? Thus, the movement was born.

But the movement was also criticized for emptying out established churches and applying American business practices to find religious consumers. Perhaps the church growth movement focused too much on the church as an experience. If you do this, then people will only go to church for those reasons. And people's tastes may change. People may have wanted certain things during the *pax Americana*, but they may want other things in the current environment. Perhaps they now want silence, tradition, and the Sacraments—things the Catholic Church is especially able to provide.

Good Pastors, Good Growth

The first reading for today is from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. He takes up the issue of the shepherds, but these are bad shepherds, the ones who mislead and scatter the flock. They scatter the sheep and they drive them away. They do not care for them. So only a remnant is left.

Now these bad shepherds must come face-to-face with the Lord who notices their actions and punishes their evil deeds. The Lord will then gather the remnant together and it will increase and multiply. It will also get a new shepherd who will shepherd without fear. (The shepherd is connected with the righteous shoot of David. This king will reign and govern wisely. He will do what is just in the land and Israel will dwell in security.) With a good shepherd, with a good leader, the flock will increase and multiply.

Then we have Psalm 23, one of the best-known psalms. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. In verdant pastures he gives me repose; beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul." Again, this is the good shepherd. He gives rest and protection to the people.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus invites the apostles to a deserted place to rest. They need to rest because the people are coming to them in great numbers. But when the people hear that the disciples are going to a deserted place, they follow them and even arrive there before them. Then Jesus sees the crowd that has gathered and his heart is moved. They are sheep without a shepherd, and he begins to teach them many things.

Two points seem to emerge from these readings. First, the numbers will grow naturally if you are a good shepherd. This is echoed in the Psalm which says that the shepherd gives good things to his flock: verdant pastures, restful waters, a table, an anointing with oil, and a house to dwell in. Second, the numbers will decline to a remnant if you are a bad pastor.

The answer seems obvious: be a good pastor, teach like a good pastor, govern like a good pastor. If you do so, the vast crowds will automatically flock to you. They are hungry and they need. They cry out for a good shepherd.

Do Not Be Deterred!

But is this always the case? What about the good pastors who do all they can do and yet still see a decline in their congregations year after year. I am reminded of the rather poignant prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours: "Be mindful of those who devote themselves to the service of their brothers, do not let them be deterred from their goals by discouraging results or lack of support."

Yes, discouraging results can sometimes deter us. We pastors are also hungry for good results. And sometimes we get them. I teach university students in the Bay Area of California, the home of Apple, Meta, and Google. It is also one of the most secular places on earth. The situation was especially dire during Covid when our students were told to isolate and be by themselves. The good news now is that they are slowly coming back. They hunger for community and being together. We pastors are moved with pity for them. We had gotten used to the idea that the "nones" were just naturally not religious. But now they increase in small numbers, at least for the time being.

In the reading from Jeremiah, we have an exodus theme. Jeremiah speaks about the false shepherd, but he is also referring to the fact that the people will be getting a new king from David's line who will rule in justice.

In Mark there is also the new exodus: Jesus withdraws to a place of rest, the crowds follow him, and he feeds them.

Perhaps it is all about fidelity. If we faithfully shepherd the flock, then perhaps we will get the vast crowds. Sometimes we will not. Sometimes the modern church is a remnant, and, at times, it is packed to capacity.

This seems to be the history of Christianity with its countless cycles of expansion and contraction, of growth and decline. The church has declined precipitously in Palestine and also in North Africa where Augustine wrote from.

Then it moved on to Europe, but has now shrunk considerably. Now it is increasing in the developing world. Perhaps it will decline there at some point as well. Then perhaps it will grow again in Europe and North America. Who can tell the future?

But this is all at the macro level. Perhaps at the micro level we simply need to be faithful and good pastors and leave the outcome to God alone.

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For Further reading:

- Augustine of Hippo "[On Good Shepherds](#)"
- Donald A. McGavran, [Understanding Church Growth](#)
- "[Pope Francis Finds a Church in Upheaval](#)"

In Short . . .

- *Good pastors seem to attract the vast crowds.*
- *Bad pastors tend to drive them down to a remnant.*
- *Perhaps we simply need to be faithful and leave the outcome to God.*