

"The Optimism of Pope John XXIII"

By Father John Catoir JCD – 5/7/17

Don't trust your pessimistic feelings.

There was a great outpouring of elation from the laity and the clergy in 1959 when Pope John XXIII announced his plans to convene the Second Vatican Council. He was 68 years old, and was considered too old to take on such a gigantic task. His optimism frightened the Cardinals who elected him. They were shocked at his determination. He was considered an interim Pope. Instead of hoping for the best, many feared the worst. But Pope John knew that the Holy Spirit was guiding him, and he trusted Divine Providence with all his heart.

Pope John died in 1963 and was canonized in 2014, but the "Age of the Laity", which he unleashed, has been slowly unfolding since 1965, the year that Vatican II concluded.

Many of the Cardinals who feared that he would go too far began opposing him. Pope John's response to all this was a public statement, calling them "prophets of gloom and doom". He ignored his critics, and went right on with his plans.

Today we find the same kind of pessimism. Many feel that the Church is slipping, and even going under. Nothing could be further from the truth. The facts tell a different tale.

We are witnessing an ongoing transformation in Christ that was initiated by Vatican II over 50 years ago, and it has shaken the Church to its roots.

Here are a few facts worth considering. There were 291 million Catholics in the world in 1910, today there are nearly 1.1 Billion Catholics, according to Pew Research Centre. Wikipedia reports that there are now 70.4 million U.S. Catholics in communion with the Pope. That figure is up from approximately 50 million in 1970, and comprises 22% of the US population. Many parishes have closed or been consolidated to adjust to changing circumstances, but the number of converts, and the influx of immigrants have kept our numbers on the rise. Also, Fall-away Catholics have been returning in large numbers. A Gallup poll said that about 20% of lapsed Catholics are seriously thinking about returning to their roots.

As for the clergy shortage, we heard recently that Pope Francis is considering the ordination of married men of proven character to the priesthood. That may or may not happen, but the fact that the issue of celibacy is being thoughtfully reexamined is heartening. Remember that for 1000 years, mandatory celibacy was not required for the priesthood.

The role of women in the Church is a matter of controversy, but all things considered there have been some remarkable gains. We see many women filling roles in the Church that were unthinkable 50 years ago. Some have been appointed as Diocesan Chancellors, and many nuns have become parish administrators. This speaks, in a modest way, to the gradual clericalization of the Church.

Also, the laity today is much more involved in evangelization than ever before. Most Catholic missionary societies have added a dedicated support system of lay men and women devoting their lives to the foreign missions. And charitable donations are up considerably. This financial support forms the backbone of all our missionary efforts in helping Catholics and people of all faiths.

I leave you with this thought, which is taken from mental health experts worldwide: feelings are not facts. The Church is Holy, and very much alive, all negative feelings to the contrary.