

Without Vision, the People Perish

As a parish minister I spent a lot of time thinking about what was wrong with the church. Nowadays I spend a lot of time thinking about what is wrong with our country. The two, I believe, are somehow related.

I've been a minister in two once-mainline denominations. Both have fallen on hard times, as have virtually all their sister denominations. The general pattern is one of aging and decline. National church organizations have been down-sizing like crazy. Even where revenues have been sustained, there has been a shift from national to local priorities. Some would say that national church leadership has been complacent in light of the general trends, which may be true. But church leaders have also been fearful and institutionally defensive. Once capacious and prophetic visions have given way to various, largely unsuccessful, programmatic strategies for renewal and revitalization. Creative theological exploration has been abandoned for traditional doctrinal affirmations. Whiffs of musty theology and nervous anxiety are only partially obscured by shallow devolutions in church music and vacuous liturgical accretions. An authentic encounter with a living God who cares little for trivial pursuits and much about justice and compassion is hard to come by in most Sunday morning services.

Our national political life is also driven much by fear, with constant palliative overdoses of fatuous patriotism and trivialized debate to distract and entertain. Our world is in a horrible mess, made tragically worse by our own government, and most Americans really don't want to know what's going on. As long as the economy putters along, and the media entertain us, we have our "bread and circus"—the surest antidote to serious engagement with the realities of imperialism in our postmodern age. There may be hostile forces out there looking to destroy us, but much more troublesome is a society so benumbed by mindless terrors and so drunk with power that it cannot bear the horror of looking itself in the mirror.

In most churches, and across the country, there is pervasive resistance to the demands of truth, authenticity, and sacrifice. Many people who do attend church flock to full-service cafeterias of therapeutic nostrums, served up with clear prescriptions for personal security. Most citizens who are suckered by promises of national security have chosen a precarious peace of mind over public responsibility and political freedom. Without some greater, commanding vision, we now languish and are bound to perish.

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