

6th Sunday of Ordinary Time C

What do you know about the history of the Catholic Church? Father Karl Rahner, a famous German theologian who died in 1984, divided Church history into three-time periods. The first one he called the “primitive Jewish Christian movement.” This was a short period of time when Christianity was considered as just another Jewish sect, that is, just a part of the Jewish religion. The second-time period had its beginning around the time when the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles was being written when the Jewish Christian movement opened itself up to the known world, that is, when it invited all people and not just Jews to be members. The reading gives us some insight into how difficult it was to make that decision. It was a major turning point in Church history. This period lasted from the first century to the twentieth century giving birth to Western civilization. The third-time period, Rahner argued, began with the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and continues through today. He predicted that the center of the Church would no longer be in Europe or America but rather be found in other cultures of the world.

As we all know, the number of practicing Catholics in Europe and America has dropped significantly over the past 50 years. In Europe the number of church going Catholics is less than 10% while here in this parish the weekly attendance at mass is 29% of those who are registered. 30 years ago weekly attendance here was at 75%.

There are presently 78 active priests in the Archdiocese of Dubuque. When I was ordained there were around 325 active priests. Of these 78 active priests, 10 are from outside of the Archdiocese mostly from Africa. We have two African priests in the Cedar Rapids area: Fr. Mark at St. Joseph in Marion and Fr. Tony at Mt. Mercy University. Both are from Ghana in

Africa where the Catholic population and number of priests are growing. Perhaps Africa will be the new center of the Church? Since Pope Francis is the first non-European pope since the 8th century, perhaps the next one will be from Africa?

Rahner saw this third-time period as one of grace and opportunity. So too did St. Luke when he wrote about the second-time period in the Acts of the Apostles. As we heard in the first reading the decision to move from a Jewish Christian Church to a universal Church was not just a decision made by the Christian leaders of that time but was also understood to be a decision of the Holy Spirit. That is, not only did these leaders do their “homework” before they initiated change but they relied on the grace of the Holy Spirit as well.

They understood Jesus’ promise that we heard in the gospel reading that he would not leave his disciples alone when he returned to the Father but rather he would leave them the Holy Spirit who would not only teach them everything but also remind them of what Jesus taught them.

All of this reminds me of the old saying, “We must work as if everything depended upon ourselves, but we must pray as if everything depended upon God.” Work and prayer are necessary parts of any change that comes about in our Church and in our own personal lives.

The Church has changed a great deal in my life time. I expect it to continue to change. How about you? Are you optimistic like Father Rahner that this third-time period in the history of the Church is one of grace and opportunity? Are you willing to work and pray to make it so?

