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Church in the modern world, Sociologist's view

Article written by Paul Allen, Associate Professor, Department of Theological Studies, Concordia University, published in the Winter 2010 issue of the *Catholic Times*.

On October 28, in the large hall of St. Ignatius parish church, local Catholics were treated to a lecture by Catholic sociologist, José Casanova. Based at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Casanova is a native of Spain and is well known in the fields of Sociology and Religious Studies for his understanding of secularization and his close attention to what this word means and what it does not mean.

Casanova's lecture was titled "Critical Challenges in Contemporary Catholicism: A Lay Response." He began with a narrative account of his own life, beginning with a childhood deeply imbued with the deep roots and richness of Spanish Catholicism. This background was, however, not altogether innocent. It was influenced by the authoritarian fascism of the Franco regime which carried favour with what Casanova described as the most conservative Episcopal hierarchy in the Catholic Church worldwide. Historically, he noted, terrible violence has been done in the name of the Church in Spain, as elsewhere. This hierarchy met roadblocks at the Second Vatican Council, which convened under the slogan 'aggiornamento', signifying the Church's confident embrace of the modern world. While that embrace has since been reconsidered as possibly naive, the writings of the Council itself have stood the test of time over the past half century. *Dignitatis Humane*, which deals with religious freedom and *Gaudium et Spes*, the church's pastoral constitution, continue to be touchstone documents, guiding Catholics who resist the tendency in the West to 'privatise' religion. For Casanova, these documents were instrumental in motivating his own approach to the investigation of the social organization of religion. And one of the trends he began to notice in the 1980's was the 'de-privatization' of religion, the re-emergence of religion as a public force, something that many other sociologists could not see at the time. And Casanova's most well known book, *Public Religions in the Modern World* lays out his ideas on this matter.

Touching on the sex abuse crises that have plagued the church in recent years, Casanova echoed the calls for transparency that have come from many quarters both within the church and outside it, from traditionalists and liberals alike. The abuse, most of which took place between the 1950's and 1980's, is testimony to a culture of silence in the church, which also

reacted to emerging stories with an approach that deferred to the procedures of canon law rather than the gospel itself. Recent evidence of this approach, according to Casanova, was a recent Vatican communication that attributed the term 'illegality' to advocates of women's ordination and the perpetration of sexual abuse. These remarks sounded to many as though these two very different issues were being treated as morally equivalent. For Casanova, such crises in communication leave the church exceptionally vulnerable to being ignored or demonized. In this situation, the moral message of the Church collapses when, as he put it, the Church "points the finger elsewhere."

From reflections on the state of the Church, Casanova moved into tentative suggestions for reform, including the need for more bishops from the southern hemisphere where the Catholic Church is growing by leaps and bounds. In Europe, from which the majority of the most newly appointed cardinals emanate, the Church is losing ground, in large part, he noted, due to the decline in participations rates among Catholic women especially. Cardinals to the church need to be more pastorally oriented, rather than administrative experts. To that end, Casanova echoed recommendations made elsewhere about the exciting possibilities of appointing lay people to the cardinalate. Casanova also specified the benefits of appointing major superiors of women religious orders. Both of these measures are already possible canonically, because the cardinalate is not a body of ordained persons unlike the episcopate from which cardinals are usually picked. The church continues to grapple with the tricky balancing act of being prophetic whilst not falling into the habit of defending traditional cultural practices. While the bishops are the ones who are charged with the responsibility of forging this difficult path forward, according to Casanova, it is up to lay people to continually press the bishops by informing them of their spiritual needs and the skills that the Church might adopt more competently in a rapidly changing global culture.