Opinion

The U.S. flag and a crucifix are pictured in an illustrative photograph. (CNS/Mike Crupi, Catholic Courier)

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August 9, 2017

CHURCH, FAITH, FUTURE: WHAT WE FACE, WHAT WE CAN DO
Louis Cameli
116 pages; Liturgical Press
$19.99

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Some bishops complain endlessly about the tides of secularism lapping against the foundations of the church and eroding the Catholic faith. Some progressive Catholics blame the church for her own predicament and refuse to believe the church does have real enemies. Some dioceses are engaged in the painful process of reorganizing parishes while others can't build new churches, and even schools, fast enough. There is a loud, well funded chorus of opposition to Pope Francis, but the people in the pews hear his message and love him for it all the more.

How to sort through all these seemingly centrifugal forces? How to assess the situation of the church in this cultural milieu and examine what options for evangelization exist? How to channel the varied and various impulses of the Holy Spirit into a new birth for the Catholic faith?

These are large questions, and Fr. Lou Cameli of the Archdiocese of Chicago does not pretend to have all the answers in his new book *Church, Faith, Future: What We Face, What We Can Do*. What Cameli does achieve, and achieve in a relatively small volume of 104 pages, is a clear and largely persuasive framing of these questions and a first attempt to provide the ecclesiastical equivalent of a GPS by which to move forward. That is no small achievement and this book should make its way into the hands of all those charged with pastoral planning, maybe even serve as an object for reflection at a presbyterial convocation or lay congress.

Cameli begins with a survey of literature to answer the question "What can we expect?" He begins with Charles Taylor's A Secular Age. It has been ten years since that book appeared. At the time everyone concluded Taylor had nailed it. I think it would be better to say that he nailed part of it. It is true that ours is a secular age, but I suspect there was more secularism in other ages than we tend to admit. We go to Chartres, that great monument to the Age of Faith, but I am guessing some of the

stone masons who built that masterpiece did so because they needed a job, and some of the people who worshipped there when it was first built were more superstitious than faithful. At least Taylor sketched secularism as developing over centuries, not when Barack Obama took the oath of office. Still, I was worried when Cameli began with Taylor.

My worry was misplaced. Cameli points out that even when secularization has taken "a nasty turn" as it did in the 20th century, those turns "have not led the church to condemn the process. In fact authoritative church teaching endorses good and healthy forms of secularization." His unwillingness to draw rigid lines, still less separate the sheep from the goats prematurely, is a key reason Cameli's mind is so fertile. Too many clerical commentators are awash in gloom and doom. Not Cameli. Two pages after discussing secularization, he writes, "In the imagination of many of our contemporaries – and this is probably also true for a good segment of believers – the church is a reservoir, a holding place, and an essentially conservative institution," he writes. "In their minds, the church remains solely focused on the maintenance of doctrines, traditions and practices rather than on changing the world. That judgment, however, represents a basic distortion of the identity of believers and the church. If the church is to remain true to itself and move into the future, it will do so as an agent and instrument of change." No "Benedict option" here.

Cameli then turns to the work of James Davison Hunter on how culture changes and how religion and modernity interact. Among other things Cameli finds relevant is Hunter's argument that the resentment exhibited by many Christians in the face of the dominant secular culture results in "an inability for Christians to offer constructive, imaginative, and creative alternatives to what the current and dominant culture offers." Yet, when Hunter goes on to say Christians are right that the dominant culture is often "at odds with traditional Christian morality and spirituality," I want to know more. If by "traditional Christian morality" is intended only sexual prohibitions, as is often the case, then Christian cultural criticism is a dead end, and not very Christian. If we want to look at the commercialization of everything in our culture, that deserves a look. I wish Cameli had paused here to make sure the broader sense of being at cultural odds was the crux of the issue.

Cameli then consults the book American Grace by Robert Putnam and David Campbell and the work of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith on young adult Catholics. Taken together, the four books lead Cameli to conclude that for the

foreseeable future, American culture is likely to be dominated by the secularism we see today and that the future of the Catholic Church will be one of decline. I may disagree a bit with his use of these texts, but it is refreshing to see someone acknowledge the reality and not let it overwhelm them into bitterness or futility or a Manichaean rant against the secular.

In fact, Cameli's next chapter poses and investigates in detail a question I have used in passing and rhetorically: Shouldn't we Christians expect the unexpected? Starting with the hungry, wandering Jews in the desert, complaining they wish to go back to Egypt, to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the Scriptures are filled with people whose lack of faith was soon contradicted by God's intervention.

The doomsayers of today, had they lived in France during the Napoleonic years, surely would have castigated Pope Pius VII for not being more strident, perhaps they would have thought the church was dying once and for all, but they would not have predicted the flourishing of spirituality that actually followed in 19th century France. Another example: In speaking of the powerful and humanly surprising effect of St. Therese of Lisieux, Cameli writes, "She also transformed the Jansenistic legacy she inherited with its emphasis on observance of the law into a singular focus on the primacy of love, the love of God and the love of neighbor." Her powerful intercession is needed now as it was then, but who would have thought this frail creature whose earthly life could scarcely have been more obscure, would have such a profound effect on so many around the world?

Cameli has the intellectual and spiritual circumspection to realize that it is possible we could witness "an unexpectedly robust Church for the wrong reasons."

Cameli then asks the obvious and challenging question: What can we do as we contemplate the likelihood of ecclesial decline? He includes an important examination of the "we" by noting the church is, at all times, an organization, a community and a movement. He rightly notes that we could do nothing or we could become a "smaller, more committed Church" but argues against both these options, using biblical images to explain their deficiencies. Cameli then uses those same images to argue for an effort to reclaim the dynamism of the Gospel by evangelizing and letting ourselves be evangelized. This is the heart of his forward-looking argument and I do not want to give away the game: Readers need to buy the book. I will only whet your appetite with an example of Cameli's penetrating analysis:

> "Most people, whether inside or outside the church, view the church as a community or institution that brings something to the world — a message, a way of life, a set of rituals. The evangelized-evangelizing dynamic reframes that perspective. As church we not only go out to the world to give it something, but together with the world we receive something — the word of life. … [Pope Paul VI's] call for dialogue and reciprocity with the world only makes sense if we understand church and world not as two opposing forces but, ultimately, as two realities bound together by the life-giving word of God."

These key theological insights are paired with very homely tales of parish life, the combination resulting in recommendations for the church in the years ahead that are neither gloom-and-doom nor pie-in-the-sky. And, the book is accessible to the lay reader who wishes to know what role he or she can play in bringing new life to the church.

The book finishes with an afterword by Cardinal Blase Cupich, including a talk he gave to his priests as he committed the archdiocese to the always fraught task of reorganizing itself. It is easy to see in that text the influence of Cameli who is the cardinal's delegate for formation. Even bishops who are not restructuring should consult this book as should pastors of all types. Ultimately, the future of the church, and of humankind is in God's hands, but as Lionel Trilling once observed, we have a moral obligation to be intelligent. This faith-filled book is intelligent.

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