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Evangelical Catholicism

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"Evangelical" is most commonly associated with some American Protestant churches, but a growing number of scholars and observers are using the word to describe emerging trends in the Roman Catholic Church.

As part of its Forum on Catholic Intellectual Tradition Today, the University of Dayton assembled a panel of heavy hitters in Catholic thought to talk about the changes they see in the church that have an evangelical character.

The panel met on campus March 11 and included William Portier, UD's Mary Ann Spearin Chair in Catholic Theology; John Allen, senior correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter; and David J. O'Brien, Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at the College of the Holy Cross. All three employ the phrase "evangelical Catholicism" but with very different meanings.

Portier first used the phrase a few years ago when trying to think of a term to describe a change he saw in his students.

"They love the pope. They wear T-shirts with the Top-10 reasons to be Catholic. They want to be Catholic," said Portier, UD's.

The increasingly pluralistic society of the United States forces churches to not take membership for granted, resulting in a shift to an enthusiastic, voluntary participation in Catholicism, Portier said.

"(Members) have to be drawn to Catholicism by attraction," he said. "You either evangelize or you die as a church in pluralism."

Allen first used the phrase while writing about the church in recent years where he witnessed a shift toward more traditional markers of Catholic identity.

"In the past, mainline, liberal thinking had the upper hand in policy making at the Vatican," Allen said. "But a bold, public return to traditional values began with John Paul II."

O'Brien agreed church leadership is returning to traditional ways, but he said the real evangelical character of the Catholic Church is not found at the top but at the bottom, in local communities.

"Evangelicalism puts an emphasis on the scriptures, personal convictions and small communities in which experiences are shared in voluntary gatherings," he said.

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