

## Roman Catholic Church Shifts

*"The future of Roman Catholicism depends on the outcome of the struggle between the people and the Pope."* (David Wells. Revolution in Rome)

### Away From Ecumenicity

The last two decades have been the most important for the centuries old Roman Catholic Church. In 1958 Pope John XXIII was elected. He opened the doors of the Vatican to the world, summoned an ecumenical council to foster Christian unity and promoted the reform of canon law. John XXIII was called the pope of peace as he wrote an encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth). He announced for the church an "aggiornamento" (modernization and reformation).

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was a turning point for the Roman Catholic Church. At the council the important declarations were largely devoid of references to the "Blessed Virgin"; though the bones of contention – Mariology and papal infallibility - were not removed. John XXIII called Protestants "separated brethren." This pronouncement was hailed as a great step forward in ecumenical relations with the non-Catholic branches of the Christian church.

This attitude by the Roman pontiff was a vast change from the position taken by the Vatican after the publication of the anti-Protestant *Syllabus* in 1864. However, the phrase "fratelli separati" (separated brethren) was already used by Pope Pius XII (1876-1958). But the Roman Church can still not imagine a reunion without "a submission under the See of St. Peter."

Cardinal George Flahiff of Winnipeg said in 1963, at the close of the second session of Vatican II, that the most significant thing in the Church of Rome was "the new mentality." But results alone will tell the reality of this "new mentality." Have all the different movements and even the upheavals fundamentally changed the Roman Church? I think of what a general of the Jesuits said of his order, which has often been applied to the Roman Church as well: "It must remain what it is or it will not be." The Roman Catholic Church still teaches that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, the successor of Peter. On the day after the election of Pope Pius XII the *Osservatore Romano* wrote: "Because the Pope is the truth, he is the gospel." This is a bold expression of the doctrine of the vicarship of Christ. This doctrine of papal infallibility has been under severe attack.

In 1968 Prof. E. Schillebeeckx said: "Rome, in panic, wants to keep controlling doctrine and life." In 1969 Cardinal Suenens of Belgium also attacked, in an interview, the papal system. In 1971, Hans Kung challenged the papacy with his book *Infallible? An Enquiry*. He argued that papal infallibility, which was declared in 1870 by the First Vatican Council, rested on shaky foundations.

### Pope Paul

Pope Paul VI, who succeeded the popular John XXIII, travelled more than any other pope. He didn't moderate the cult of mariology, which remains a vital stumbling block to ecumenical relations. On the eve of his departure for a pilgrimage to the shrine of Fatima in Portugal, he preached: "All those who believe in the Gospel are obliged to venerate the Virgin Mary." In his encyclical "Mysterium Fidei" he spoke against the progressives in his church, who called the mass a "memorial feast" in which the cross of Christ is merely remembered. Pope Paul tried to preserve unity in the Church after Vatican II. He had to mediate between the progressives who wanted more changes, and the conservatives who were frightened of them.

## **John Paul**

John Paul II, a native from Poland where the Catholic church is extremely conservative and tradition-bound, is Rome's strong and already controversial leader today. John Paul is strong in a traditional sense, no matter how many press conferences he holds. He lays great stress on his hope and trust in the Virgin Mary. Germany has been dedicated to the immaculate heart of Mary. In a number of countries, with the apparent encouragement of the Pope, the Monday after Pentecost has been declared a feast day in honour of Mary. This devotion to Mary is hardly an ecumenical theme that will win the hearts of Protestants! The pope declared in Turin that, since Liberalism and Marxism have failed, the Roman Church alone is the answer to the crisis of the world and not Jesus as Vatican II had declared).

## **Europe now**

The priesthood in Europe is declining in numbers. In France alone, there were 40,000 priests in 1965. Ten years later the number had fallen off to 30,000. Seminary enrollment had dropped from 920 new seminarians in 1966 to only 243 in 1972. The Catholic population in France has been estimated at 94 percent. Yet only 16 percent attend mass with frequency. Missologist Herbert Kane has called France "the most pagan country in Europe." And he added: "Fear and superstition abound, especially in the rural areas, and more and more people are turning to spiritism; so much so that the Roman Catholic Church now regards France as a mission field."

In Italy, many priests are defecting from their vocation. In a country where 99.4 percent is nominally Catholic, a referendum officially approved the institution of divorce as a right for Italian citizens. In 1977, a liberal abortion law was passed handily in the Chamber of Deputies.

There are fundamental disagreements with the Vatican and the hierarchy. The progressives insist that they have a place with the Church. The Polish pope is making his conservative presence felt. What will happen to the Roman Catholic Church in Europe will effect the Church worldwide. Theologies change with the times, but the old dogmas remain. How the Roman Church will fare throughout the turbulent eighties will strongly depend on the current. Helmsman – Pope John Paul II.

## **Rome Maintains Authority**

Ecclesia Catholica. Roma Locuta. Causa Finita Est – that was once a well-known phrase. Rome has spoken; the issue is settled. No one can speak against it.

The Dutch sector of the Roman Catholic church is once again under the authority of the pope. What happened? The Roman Catholic church in Holland was fervently traditionalist before the Second World War. She had a reputation of being "more catholic than the pope."

The war experiences saw the rigid lines dividing protestants and Roman Catholics disappearing. Postwar prosperity created an affluent Roman Catholic middle class that felt less inclined to take directions from Rome than previous generations. The Second Vatican Council improved relationships with other Christians and opened the windows of the ancient Vatican city to the world.

In the course of a few years, the Roman Catholic Church in The Netherlands became the most autonomous and independent in the fold. Time and time again, it challenged Rome's ideas of orthodoxy. The new adult catechism was endorsed by the Dutch hierarchy, while it sidestepped teachings such as Jesus' sacrifice and the perpetual virginity of Mary. It came under Vatican fire for being too ambiguous and liberal.

The Dutch Pastoral Council, an assembly of laymen, priests and bishops, rejected Pope Paul's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* as "not convincing on the basis of the argumentation given." That statement received prominence and it was signed by nine bishops, including Cardinal Berhard Jan Alfrink.

The Council voted most unanimously in favour of abolishing compulsory celibacy for priests, and urged Rome to relax the rule. Obligatory Sunday mass was dropped. Some Roman Catholic churches allowed interfaith marriages with Protestants. Married ex-priests were permitted to teach on seminary faculties.

Pope Paul was anxious to avoid a formal schism within the Dutch church. Over the objections of the liberal bishops, he appointed, in 1971, the conservative Mrsg. Adriaan Simonis as bishop of Rotterdam. And over the angry protests of the liberals, he named, in 1972, Jan Gysen as bishop of Roermond.

The liberals want to be relevant in this volatile, rapidly changing and dangerous world. But in quest for modernity, the Dutch Catholics divided the church. The conservatives fought against the liberalizing trends. The conciliatory Cardinal Willebrands was unable to establish a working harmony among the bishops.

Pope John Paul II called for an extraordinary synod of Dutch bishops to discuss the crisis within the Dutch church. For nearly three weeks, the Dutch hierarchy met with the Pope. Each day the Pope was greeted by the bishops, by way of kneeling before him, and they celebrated the mass together.

The Polish Pope didn't hesitate to speak his mind. He spoke often and decisively. In 46 statements the decisions of the Synod, which are intended to enforce Vatican's policies, were explained.

The bishops will crack down on the deviations from official Roman doctrine. They agreed to a new catechetical decree to accompany the controversial adult Dutch Catechism. The bishops confirmed the necessity of celibacy, individual confession and absolution, a more stringent policy regarding mixed marriages, i.e., between Protestants and Catholics. And the bishops halted the growing practice of intercommunion between Protestant and Roman Catholics.

Rome has spoken. Rome has not changed. The church is still above Scripture. The Pope still has the sole authority in his hands. What Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal wrote in 1867 is still true today: "Let each say in his heart, 'I hear my cure, my cure hears the bishop, the bishop hears the Pope, and the Pope hears our Lord Jesus Christ.'"

The Catholic church is still seen as the sole true church. This traditional faith was restated once more by the Second Vatican Council: "This is the one Church of Christ which in the creed is professed as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; which our Saviour, after His resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd, and together with the other apostles to extend and direct with authority, which He erected for all ages as the pillar and mainstay of the truth."

In 1976, Fr. Cormac Burke, a former Irish lawyer, wrote in a Catholic position paper entitled *Freedom and Magisterium* that "the Church has always believed that the Pope has still power to govern the Church itself, and that the same respect and obedience are due to his authority as are due to the authority of Christ: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."

The changes in the Roman Catholic church came too fast. Instead of change, people long for security. They seek traditional values for support. In response to the revisionists within the church, the Pope gave the liberals according to the British journalist Patrick O'Donovan "the same remedy that the Council of Trent (1545-63) applied to the Reformation. And that was called the Counter-Reformation."

What was the reaction to the decisions made by the special Synod? The Dutch press called them disappointing. The conservatives were happy. The liberals were forced to retreat. People, who sought accommodation of the church's message to the spirits of the age for the salvation of church and world were shocked. But the bishops accepted the authority of Rome and said "yes" to the Pope. Was the synod of bishops the cure which the church needed? Time will tell.

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