

## The Winds of Change in the Roman Catholic Church

Traditionalists, charismatics, and liberation theologians are all part of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines, of which more than 80% of the population are members or adherents. The winds of change have not bypassed the Philippine Roman Catholic Church. But the changes brought about by Vatican II and by contacts with ecumenical movements have not only contributed to the climate of change, but also to confusion.

Who is the Roman Catholic traditionalist? The traditional Filipino Roman Catholic is spiritually insecure. He knows about the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but he has only a vague idea what these facts should mean to him personally. The traditional Filipino has heard about heaven and wants and tries to get there. However, he is not sure if he will ever make it. He wants forgiveness, but it eludes him. He is forever striving to earn merit, but can't be sure that he will ever earn enough. One day I visited a magnificent Spanish style cathedral in Manila. The building was the size of a city block. I was struck by the sight of a young man, a woman in her 30's, and a middle-aged lady crawling on their knees from the portals of the church up to the altar in the front. I also saw worshippers, young and old alike, kissing the feet of statues, taking a handkerchief to wipe the crucifix, press one hand on a picture of Mary and afterwards making the sign of the cross.

During holy week, a Filipino may carry a large wooden cross or whip his back in penance for sin.

On the ninth day of January, crowds in Manila jostle with one another, and get hurt in the process – just to see and touch the image of the Nazarene. On Good Friday, cities and towns have huge processions. Statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the apostles, scenes of the crucifixion, and a glass coffin with the Christ are paraded through the streets.

Who is the Roman Catholic charismatic? He reads the Bible, attends mass, is devoted to the Virgin Mary and claims to be baptized by the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues. He belongs to one of the rapidly growing religious movements in the Philippines.

Fr. Leonardo Polinar was an activist parish priest in Tagbilaran City for seven years. He spent practically all his time helping and organizing poor farmers and destitute workers. He said that he became involved with the activists as he thought it was the best way to practice his Christianity.

Fr. Polinar, through the testimony of his mother, two sisters and some friends, became a changed man. He is no longer involved with the activists. He believes that he has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the ability to speak in tongues. He is now one of the leaders of the Roman Catholic charismatic movement. He invites people to come to Christ, to be converted and to share his experiences.

The charismatic movement is still young. How Biblically oriented is the charismatic movement in the Roman Catholic church? The executive director of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches remarked that the Catholic charismatic movement can no longer be ignored by evangelicals. He said that we must recognize its presence, although we must approach it with great caution, even just for our own sake. And he referred to Cardinal Suenens' book, *A New Pentecost?* as a case in point. Cardinal Suenens extolled in his book the virgin Mary's special place in the charismatic movement.

He writes:

"Mary cannot fail to lead us to Jesus, even as a river leads to the sea ... In union with her and following in her steps, we are helped to receive the Holy Spirit and to listen to his promptings .... To be receptive to the spiritual motherhood of Mary, is an unailing sign to our openness to the Holy Spirit .... To experience communion with the Holy Spirit in union with Mary, we must begin by performing some acts and explicitly direct our attention to her ... We breathe in Mary and breathe out the Spirit. The end in view is always the same: to give Jesus to the world ... We should go on to show the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus and our mother, has in the household of the Church. When family relationships break down, it is natural that reconciliation take place around the mother .... She is the Christian par excellence ... the first charismatic..."

Who is the liberation theologian? He wants to develop a new style of theology which is relevant for today. His point of departure is neither tradition nor Scriptural, but "what is going on in the world." Not the Bible but the economic-social-political analysis of the living conditions in which millions of poor are living throughout the world must form the basis of liberation theology. Fr. C.G. Arevalo, Professor at Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, says that the church in the Philippines must take the side of the poor. He states that the church is the privileged instrument; institute, raised up by Christ to work within the world, to work within history to help prepare mankind to become the Kingdom of God.

In 1978, 68 leaders of Roman Catholic religious orders, including Jesuits, Franciscans, Benedictines and Dominicans met in Rome on the theme of "the commitment of the religious (priests, monks, and nuns) to human development." A working group of English speaking superiors-general at the conference said: "Marxist analysis is spread widely, and members of our religious orders have been reached."

The group also said: "Our more courageous priests are committed to Marxism. Up to what point can we encourage them?" One superior-general asked: "In the face of injustices which cry out for retribution, should we not react on a political level?" But the conferees were bluntly told that, "Other than in exceptional cases, and with due approval, priests will abstain from joining politics in any form."

The Roman Catholic Church is undergoing intense turmoil. Pope John Paul II will need all his considerable talents and energy to keep the church together.

The ranks of the priesthood grow thinner as a declining number of young men aspire for the priesthood. I met a priest in a nearby town, who had to look after 25,000 parishioners. He can barely keep up with the celebrations of mass, conducting funerals, performing wedding ceremonies and the administration of the sacrament of baptism. He has no time to instruct his flock in the faith. Throughout the world, priests are leaving the priesthood. They are invariably the "progressives" for whom Vatican II opened windows through which it became easier to scramble out and leave, though Pope John never intended that kind of freedom. He only opened the windows to let light enter and air blow through the church.

What is the reaction of the Philippine evangelical community to the winds of change in the ancient church of Rome? On September 23, 1978, the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches sponsored a conference of selected Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders. The most important question at the conference was: Is the Philippines still a mission field? Protestant leaders are polarized on this issue. Some evangelical leaders no longer view the Philippines as "unreached", except for a small percentage belonging to the cultural minorities. Others are asking: "Is it right to convert Catholics?" (Meaning those people in the Philippines who claim to be members or adherents of the Roman Catholic Church). Some leaders point to the actual Roman Catholic religious practices one can witness wherever one travels in the Philippines. They say: "Look at the use of the images, the praying to the saints, the dedication to the Virgin Mary, the dependence on good works or church membership for salvation. And the official teachings of the church haven't been recanted. They haven't changed at all." The conference agreed at least on three things: (1) The need to evangelize the Philippines (including the Roman Catholics); (2) There are born-again Catholics; and (3) The recognition that the visible church is indispensable in nurturing the Christian life and for worship.

The sensitive issue was the membership of born-again Catholics. Should they stay with the Roman Catholic Church or leave and join an evangelical denomination? The position of the conferees ranged from one extreme to another. Rev. Ariel Costes, a born-again Catholic, who elected to remain within the Roman Catholic Church, didn't only assert that born-again Catholics should remain in their churches, but also said that he required born-again Catholics under his ministry to swear by their Bibles not to leave the Catholic church.

Rev. Anthony Pezzota, a former Roman Catholic, who is now a Baptist missionary teaching at the Asian Theological Seminary at Manila, contends resolutely that born-again Catholics need to change church fellowship. He maintains that fellowship must be in love and truth. The inference is that he sees the Roman Catholic as a false church. What will happen to the Roman Catholic Church? The answer lies buried in the tomb of time.

I find the Philippine evangelical discussions on Roman Catholicism fascinating. They testify of deep concern and realism of what is taken place in the Roman Catholic Church.

Should born-again Catholics stay in the Roman Catholic Church? An excellent question, but I haven't heard evangelicals asking: "Why do we still have Protestantism? Why are we not Roman Catholics? Was the 16th century Reformation unnecessary?"

What is the key issue that sets Protestantism apart from Roman Catholicism? What is the soul of the Reformation? Is the Roman Catholic Church of the latter part of the 20th century a reformed Catholic church? Aside from the great variety of issues that have come out of Vatican II, later developments and the winds of change, I believe that the root of our differences is still the doctrine of grace. The doctrine of grace was the key issue faced by the leaders of the Reformation and it is still the key issue for us today. It is not easy to write on Catholicism. So many articles have already been written. Yet, I feel compelled to make a few observations as a Reformed Christian living and working in the only Catholic nation in Asia.

How much has the Roman Catholic Church actually changed? The Dutch cardinal Alfrink has said that the basic doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church cannot be changed. He remarked that Vatican II can't contradict the declarations of the previous church councils. So, despite all what was said and done during Vatican II council sessions, the heart of Catholicism appears still the same. Therefore, as I see it, the doctrine of grace is still the issue that divides Protestantism and Catholicism. The soul of the Reformation is the antithesis of sin and grace. In Catholicism man is cooperating with grace.

The Filipino Catholic believes that works must be added to grace. Do the best you can and God will do the rest. But when and how do you know that you have done your best? Though man has sinned, he still has power to do good things, things so good that he can earn merits in the sight of God, and salvation depends on them. The sinner is saved by the merits of Christ, plus the merits of the saints and his own.

The council of Trent, in the sixteenth century, defended the merit-earning through good works, the works that precede grace as well as the works that follow grace. Grace is voluntarily received. It is God's assistance given to the believer in keeping the law. It is power poured into a person through which he becomes changed and holier.

Vatican II didn't make any changes in Trent's teaching on man cooperating with grace. It declared that "the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise among creatures to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this unique source."

The Marian doctrine is still a stumbling block for the Protestant. It illustrates the Catholic concept of grace. According to Catholicism, Mary has a special place in the economy of salvation. Vatican II said that "just as a woman (Eve) contributed to death, so also a woman (Mary) should contribute to life." Mary is viewed as "used by God not merely in a

passive way, but as cooperating in the work of human salvation." Even in heaven, Mary still is active in working on behalf of the faithful. "For, taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside this saving role, but by her manifold acts of intercession continues to win for us gifts of eternal salvation." A 1975 Philippine Catholic position paper says that the faithful have the most powerful ally in their fight against sin: "Our Lady, help of Christians and refuge of sinners, our mother, and our queen."

David F. Wells, In his book, *Revolution in Rome*, makes this pertinent observation: "Mary is the prototype of the Roman Catholic. By her cooperative action, she won the approval of God. By implication, does not this divine approval also extend to the whole Catholic Church? And is not the basis of works in salvation also divinely approved? In Mary we have seemingly irrefutable validation of Roman theology at its fundamental points."

The fact that Vatican II has changed so much in the church of Rome, but retained Mariology, leaves us to ask: "Isn't the biblical way of salvation at stake here?"

The biblical doctrine of grace has never been popular. At the seminars we conduct once a month for the community, we are often asked about the need of man to cooperate with God in matters of salvation. "What is our role in the salvation of our soul?" Our answer always is: "We are utterly dependent on God's grace until the day we die. Christ has paid it all through His perfect obedience even until death. He merited for His people their salvation in full."

Was the Reformation in vain? I believe that God raised up Martin Luther to restore the Gospel of free and pure grace. Luther renounced dependence on good works and taught again dependence on God's grace alone for salvation. The Reformer affirmed that we can supply nothing but the sinners to be saved. He was determined to deal seriously with man's sin, with original sin, his total inability to save himself, the total and utter corruption of the heart, the depth and horror of the fall of our first parents in paradise. He laid hold on grace. He confessed that "after all, nothing we can do is of any avail, however, good a life we live."

Luther believed that the grace he taught was none other than the grace expounded by the apostle Paul in his epistles. He is reported to have said in his table talks in 1538: "There was a certain cardinal in the beginning of the Gospel plotting many things against me in Rome." A court fool, looking on, is said to have remarked: "My Lord, take my advice and first dispose Paul from the company of the apostles; it is he who is giving us all the trouble." It was the teaching of the apostle Paul Luther was reviving, and what Luther was zealous to propagate and defend was the common property of the whole body of Reformation.

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