

How Catholic are you?

(a paper for the meeting of IRFCM in October 2009 - Wim van der Velden)

"How Catholic are you?" could be a fascinating question. Please, close your eyes, give yourself a few minutes to think about it, and formulate an honest answer. Having done this, mentally or on paper, you will probably want to check it against a standard norm or a measuring-rod. Happily or unhappily, you can find a lot of them in all varieties, from the abyss of heresy to the most strongly orthodox pious interpretation of being a Catholic.

How Catholic are you? The way you are a Catholic, determines the kind of vision you have of priests and priesthood.

In the oldest Credos (300-400) we read: "I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church". Here is not meant our modern Roman Catholic Church, distinct from other churches, because in those ages they did not exist at all. It underlines the common, worldwide union between Christians, despite the existence of various interpretations of the person of Jesus Christ. Some of us may feel happy with this interpretation that gives space for all differences and spectra existing between Christians in so many cultures and churches. One Spirit is making us to one worldwide religious family, having its roots in the multi-coloured testimony of the apostles.

During the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), bishops from all over the world met in Rome to share their questions and concerns, their guardianship of the local churches, seeking in each other comfort and sharing their common issues. One could listen to the daily miseries, the suffering of injustice or poverty. The bishops were seeking new ways for supporting and inspiring people, in accordance with a tradition of many ages.

It seemed to be a new springtime for the church, under the inspiring leadership of John XXIII. There was hope and a expectation that, after the period of the Pius popes with their strong centralist visions, a new era would grow with reverence for a greater variety in catholic practice in diverse countries and cultures. There was also an important group among the Council fathers wanting important theological issues to be formulated in accordance with modern insights, for example on creation, and on management of church organisation, or seeking for the conditions to make it possible for modern women and men to believe in a spiritual, significant way of life.

Very painful, for a lot of people, was the reversal after the death of John XXIII, starting with Paul VI and his successors, including Benedict XVI. The hope and the confidence of John XXIII in men and in their ways of believing had to make way for the anxiety of Paul VI that Rome might lose its central position of magisterium if bishops began to take initiatives either individually or as national commissions.

Signs of hope and renewal were systematically abolished and reversed, reinforced by the appointment of the most conservative priests as bishops. The free spirit of the Council was

to be put back into the bottle. Hopeful themes of the Council were contradicted by papal encyclicals and papal statements. Instead of a hopeful spring, a mournful autumn came - followed by a cold winter.

From that moment on, polarization grew among Catholics. There were Rome-minded Catholics who accepted the totality of guidelines presented by the central magisterium. On the other hand, there were Catholics who were not that happy with this "Roman" interpretation. Remaining Christian or Catholic they tried to seek new ways.

There are those who see the whole of revelation as an unchangeable divine gift to mankind. This gift comes to us through the necessary mediation of the divinely structured church, through ordained bishops and ordained priests. *Extra ecclesia nulla salus*: there is no salvation outside the church.

There are other Catholics who see revelation as a progressive process in our world. They look to history; they try to explore how Jesus lived with his apostles; they explore the early history of the church, without dogmatic prejudices. As an example I quote Jan Nieuwenhuis, one of the authors of 'Church and Ministry' (Dutch Dominicans): "Jesus never chose any one to priest, neither did he ordain anyone. There was not one priest among the twelve; one was a publican (Mt 9:9; Lk 5:27). On the evening of the so-called last supper he broke the bread and passed round the cup with the words: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). Through this gesture he used the old gesture of Melchisedeck that means: bless each other; act in justice; be at peace. That was the only election and sanctification."

Pope Benedict XVI has sent a letter to all Catholic priests in the world. On June 19, 2009, he inaugurated a "Year of the Priest". It is to be a year of prayer for the sanctification and renewal of the clergy. He appointed Saint John Mary Vianney, parish priest of Ars, France (1786-1859), as patron saint of parish priests worldwide. Vianney once said:

'Without the priest, the passion and death of our Lord would be of no avail. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth. ... What use would be a house filled with gold, were there is no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is him who opens the door: he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of His goods. ... Leave a parish for twenty years without a priest, and they will end by worshipping the beasts there. ... The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you.'

There are people who think it absolutely necessary to change the Church's doctrine. Thus the US (Episcopal) bishop John Shelby Spong calls for a 'New Reformation'. The following is a summary of his thoughts.

In the 16th century the Christian Church, which had been the source of much of the stability of the western world, entered a period of internal and violent upheaval. In time this upheaval came to be called the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was not an attempt to reformulate the Christian faith for a new era. It was rather a battle over issues of Church order. The time had not arrived in which Christians would be required to rethink the basic and identifying marks of Christianity itself.

It is my conviction that such a moment is facing the Christian world today. The very heart and soul of Christianity will be the content of this reformation. The debate which has been building for centuries has now erupted into public view. All the past ecclesiastical efforts to keep it at bay or deny its reality have surely failed and will continue to do so.

The need for a new theological reformation began when Copernicus and Galileo removed this planet from its previous supposed location at the center of the universe, where human life was thought to bask under the constant attention of a humanly defined parental deity. That revolution in thought produced an angle of vision radically different from the one in which the Bible was written and through which the primary theological tenets of the Christian faith were formed.

Martin Luther ignited the Reformation of the 16th century by nailing to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517 the 95 Theses that he wished to debate. I will post my theses on the Internet and send copies with invitations to debate them to the recognized Christian leaders of the world. My theses are far smaller in number than were those of Martin Luther, but they are far more threatening theologically. The issues to which I now call the Christians of the world to debate are these:

- 1. Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. So most theological God-talk is today meaningless. A new way to speak of God must be found.*
- 2. Since God can no longer be conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity. So the Christology of the ages is bankrupt.*
- 3. The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.*
- 4. The virgin birth, understood as literal biology, makes Christ's divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.*
- 5. The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted in a post-Newtonian world as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity.*
- 6. The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God and must be dismissed.*
- 7. Resurrection is an action of God. Jesus was raised into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history.*
- 8. The story of the Ascension assumed a three-tiered universe and is therefore not capable of being translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.*
- 9. There is no external, objective, revealed standard writ in scripture or on tablets of stone that will govern our ethical behaviour for all time.*
- 10. Prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way.*
- 11. The hope for life after death must be separated forever from the behaviour control mentality of reward and punishment. The Church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behaviour.*
- 12. All human beings bear God's image and must be respected for what each person is. Therefore, no external description of one's being, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, can properly be used as the basis for either rejection or discrimination.*

So I set these theses today before the Christian world and I stand ready to debate each of them.

Thus Bishop Spong.

For very many Christians, the church has lost its credibility. Especially the three issues of original sin, redemption through the cross, and everlasting salvation, have lost their importance. People are no longer interested in these concepts nor in any explanations of these words. The truth has not changed, but has lost its significance or importance for the common people. The old truth has no longer the capacity of holding the attention or making any impression.

On the other hand, people are interested in religion, specially in issues like: fundamental equality, inclusive language and positive discrimination, theology starting from the needs of men, attention to everyday things, exploration of the evil forces of our society, friendship and partnership as central forces, more emphasis on Jesus' life than on his death, love of God and men.

All this means that the church is in a deep crisis. We see churches being closed, all over the world. Are we supposed to be sad, or is it only a serious warning that we have to look for new ways for religion? Famous Swiss theologian Hans Küng and a lot of serious other theologians have warned the Pope that his manner of leadership is bad for the Church, and they indicate ways of improvement. But....most church societies are going more and more to the right and hold tight to the old patterns and outdated rules. In the Roman Catholic Church there is a process of re-sacramentalism and re-clericalism. At the same time various religious movements have come into existence, and there is widespread interest in spirituality.

People are searching. In the past we lived with certainties; today we are searching like pilgrims with a lot of questions. We form new communities, not like the close-knit parish communities of old, but in the model of 'fluid churches', communities, based on (temporary) participation, flexible and transient.

In those new communities, new possibilities grow for church, belief and the gospel. There we find more freedom, more possibilities for engagement and authentic ways to be a Catholic and a Christian.

So in closing, I repeat my opening question: "How Catholic are you?" The way you are a Catholic, shows the kind of vision you have of priests and priesthood. And perhaps you are so Catholic that you are glad with the situation that there is no clergy: A Clergyless Church.

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