

## THE CHURCH: DECLINE OR PURIFICATION?

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Faced with a notable drop in religious practice, the drastic decline of vocations, open disagreement with the Magisterium, and transgressions regarding Church law, many people today are speaking about the “decline” of the Church. Instead, I am convinced that what we are dealing with is not a decline but rather a purification. In other words, the Church today is going through one of those periods in her history in which the Holy Spirit—her guide—is renewing her, bringing her back to the purity of her beginnings so that so can continue to faithfully make Christ present in the world and proclaim the Gospel. As has already happened countless times in her 2000-year history, it is a “return to the apostolic times.”

The present crisis can certainly also be linked to the profound socio-cultural changes that have accompanied the transition of the world from the modern to the post-modern era. These changes brought to an end the so-called “reign of Christianity,” which was born in the West with the decree of Constantine (313 A.D.) and, with many ups and downs, lasted until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the Third Millennium, the overlapping of faith and politics, throne and altar, sword and crucifix, that characterized the centuries of “Christianity” seems to have been definitively left behind on both the historical level, as a result of the processes that have secularized the contemporary world, and on the theological level, as a result of Vatican Council II. Consequently, the Church now finds herself deprived of the supports and privileges she enjoyed during the “reign of Christianity,” when she was universally considered to be a power among powers. Today she is poor and unarmed—a condition similar to that of her beginnings, in spite of the fact that many vestiges of her old power remain and still have to be purged.

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Seeing this crisis of purification looming on the horizon, the last Popes, in particular John Paul II and Benedict XVI, prepared Christians to courageously face it. The Church, Pope John Paul II wrote, “cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves, through repentance, of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency, and slowness to act. Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today’s temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them.”<sup>2</sup> The problems, Benedict XVI says in his turn, do not come only from outside conditions but also from sins and infidelities within the Church: “Attacks on the Pope and on the Church come not only from outside it. [...] The greatest persecutions of the Church do not come from outside enemies but spring from sins within the Church. And therefore she has a profound need to relearn penitence, to accept purification.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, after the end of the “reign of Christianity” marks a return to apostolic times. As has happened before, the Church is living a time of *kairos*—a difficult but very precious moment granted to her by the Spirit so that she can renew herself and return to the purity of her beginnings. So we can ask ourselves three questions: 1) What are the signs that the Church is not in decline but in a stage of purification? 2) Is the Church aware of this? 3) What should she do about it?

## 1. What are the signs?

An attentive reading of the signs of the times clearly reveals that the Church of our day is going through a period of purification. These signs are above all: *the neopaganism of the contemporary world; the fact that the Church is a persecuted minority; the abundant flowering of new charisms.*

### a) Contemporary Neopaganism

A first sign of the times that allows us to speak about a return to apostolic times is the “neo-pagan” culture (a culture without God) that prevails today. The modern world has rejected every connection between culture and faith and instead has opted for a complete secularization of life and customs. We live in a Godless culture—a materialistic and consumeristic culture that opens the door to moral deviations and forms of violence that are often more refined than those characteristic of ancient paganism. Thanks to science and technology, the modern person is “wrongly convinced that he is the sole author of himself, his life and society,” writes Pope Benedict XVI. “The conviction that man is self-sufficient and can successfully eliminate the evil present in history by his own action alone has led him to confuse happiness and salvation with immanent forms of material prosperity and social action.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, reason has been separated from faith, causing human beings to deny that science and religion can live in agreement with each other. Politics and the economy reject any relationship with ethics. Positivism and scientism dominate, tending to eliminate from the human horizon anything that goes beyond the senses or that cannot be verified experimentally. Religion, therefore, is considered (or tolerated) as a mere subjective question,

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), n. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Interview with journalists en route to Portugal for the 10th anniversary of the beatification of the shepherds of Fatima* (11 May 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), n. 34.

without any public relevancy. The old temptation returns: Why do human beings need God if they are self-sufficient and can liberate themselves through their own efforts? But that is not the case, Pope Benedict XVI replies. “True development does not consist primarily in ‘doing.’ The key to development is a mind capable of thinking in technological terms and grasping the fully human meaning of human activities, within the context of the holistic meaning of the individual's being. [...]Without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is.”<sup>5</sup>

In short, in spite of the extraordinary goals reached in all fields thanks to the exceptional development of science and technology, the modern era has fostered the re-emergence of a pagan culture that exalts moral deviations, violence, money, sex, power—all characteristics of the ancient pagan world. It is true that sociological research reveals that contemporary men and women are rediscovering their need for God but it is a purely natural aspiration in that it does not make these individuals receptive to faith. Instead, this search for the spiritual easily falls into superstition or deviations typical of the New Age movement.

### ***b) The Church as a Persecuted Minority***

A second sign of the times that allows us to say that the Church is returning to her apostolic origins is the fact that today Christians are in the minority, just as they were in the early Church. We are facing not just a drastic drop in the number of Christians who concretely practice their Faith, but also a powerful and generalized “fall from faith”—a phenomenon most clearly seen in countries with the longest histories of Christianity. Adherence to the Gospel and to the Magisterium of the Church is progressively losing its visible, societal dimension and no longer inspires cultures and customs. The problem is aggravated by the fact that today Christians are not only a minority but are also persecuted, exactly as happened in apostolic times. “The Church,” writes John Paul II, “has once again become a Church of martyrs. The persecutions of believers—priests, religious and laity—has caused a great sowing of martyrdom in different parts of the world.”<sup>6</sup> And the persecution of Christians in our day is rapidly increasing, to the point that Pope Benedict XVI has called the phenomenon a true “Christianophobia” (fear of Christians).

These considerations should not plunge us into pessimism. What is happening is not that the Church is declining but undergoing purification, which God is allowing so as to renew her. In fact, “to be in the minority” is the original condition of his “little flock” (Lk. 12:32), as Jesus defined the Church. The Church was born to be leaven. From time to time, down the ages, it became rich and powerful. Whenever this happened, the Holy Spirit, who guides her, stepped in to lead her back to her beginnings. This is what is happening today in the wake of all the privileges the Church enjoyed under the “reign of Christianity.” “Minority,” however, is not synonymous with “marginalized.” No matter how much of a minority the Church is, no matter how poor or persecuted she is, she can never be a marginal presence in the world because Christ dwells in her. In spite of her limitations, she has been sent out to proclaim the Gospel to all people, all nations. The Church’s missionary dimension has always been one of her essential features.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ivi.*, nn. 70,78.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), n. 37.

### c) *The Abundant Flowering of New Charisms*

Finally, there is another sign of the times that supports our parallel of the contemporary Church with the Church of apostolic times, namely: the fact that she is living a “charismatic time” in her history—a time that opened with Vatican Council II. In fact, today we can clearly see the widespread rediscovery of the Word of God as the living “seed,” indeed as a living Person, who calls, converts and heals with the same power manifested in the Church’s beginnings. It is enough for us to notice the extraordinary flowering that the Word of God is producing in every part of the world: spiritual movements, testimonies, service of the poor and marginalized in keeping with the model offered by the Gospel....

An ulterior confirmation that the Church is living a rich “charismatic” time is also the ecumenical journey toward unity being made today. Jesus prayed for this unity before facing his Passion (“That the world might believe”: Jn. 17:21). Faced with today’s crisis of values and the threat of moral relativism, and in spite of fears of recrimination, the Churches today see the need to reforge unity among themselves, in keeping with the will of God, so as to enlighten consciences and more effectively serve the cause of justice and peace in the world.

In conclusion, the present situation of testing and purification in which the Church finds herself is the prelude to a new “Christian springtime,” as has been true time and again down the ages. Pope John Paul II’s positive outlook on the situation remains valid: “If we look at today’s world, we are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism. But this feeling is unjustified: we have faith in God our Father and Lord, in his goodness and mercy. As the third millennium of the redemption draws near, God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity.”<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Is the Church aware of this?

The general impression is that the ecclesial community is not yet resigned to the end of the “reign of Christianity.” The fact that it *has* ended is admitted both vocally and in writing, but in concrete life and in pastoral work everything continues as if nothing has happened, as if the population were still made up of well-evangelized believers, as if Christian moral virtues were still shared by the great majority of the people. There is the clear sensation that, besides the decline in religious practices and the widespread abandonment of them, even the recurrence of major events (for instance, the popular referendum favoring divorce and abortion; open disagreement with the Magisterium on the subjects of bioethics; problems concerning the beginning and end of life, family life and sexual morals; not to mention the insignificant presence of Catholics in politics and the tolerance of disgraceful public scandals) is still not enough to open our eyes to see how “de-Christianized” we are.

This leads the Church to live defensively, running the risk of seeing attacks and enemies everywhere and of fomenting a climate of “victimism.” As a consequence, within the Church there is a growing aversion to the modern world, every criticism of her is seen as an accusation and is rejected intolerantly, and she finds it difficult to acknowledge her errors. The reason is that we are still thinking in terms of “Christianity”—of a time in which the Church’s institutions and her pronouncements were backed by civil authority and by the privileges granted to her by civil contracts; a time when theology itself spoke about the Christianization of the world and believed that it was part of the Church’s mission to guide society and to have her efforts supported by the culture of the nation.

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<sup>7</sup> Id., *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), n. 86.

On its part, civil society—pluralistic, secular and under many aspects post-Christian—looks askance at the initiatives of the Church and her social doctrine because after a long experience of “Christianity,” the suspicion remains that in spite of the changes underway the Pope and bishops are trying to impose the Church’s hegemony (perhaps under new forms) in the political and legislative realms.

As for the internal life of the ecclesial community, above all regarding making the most of the mission and vocation of the laity in the Church and society, one has the impression that Christians are not aware of the profound changes that have taken place to weaken or even extinguish the faith of many of the baptized. It is not only a matter of giving the faithful new and greater responsibilities in the Church. The real problem is that of educating them so that they will develop a mature faith: “Only a lively concern for the faith of people is able to build a new balance of relationships between the Church and contemporary culture: one that does not prevent her from manifesting the moral judgment proper to her on hotly-debated subjects, but one that at the same time is not—and should not appear to be—the desire to impose on society and its legislative organs her decisions concerning what to adopt, instead of proposing the Gospel to everyone, with all its values, as the font of inspiration for all those who are searching for a more equitable answer to problems concerning the common good.”<sup>8</sup> This is the crucial point. If the members of the Church do not possess an adult faith, then all their attempts, no matter how courageous and necessary, to renew things on the pastoral, social and political planes, will be useless.

Therefore, it is a mistake to continue to carry out pastoral work as if the majority of the people of God had a secure faith, even though “buried under ashes.” This is not reality: “The crucial point of the crisis in the Church-society relationship is the crisis of faith. Consequently, only if the Church takes as her starting point attention to persons (who must be reached according to their interior needs and their search for meaning) and dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel, will she be able to tear down the barrier between her words and consciences and relate positively to modern culture, life and the good order of civil society. Not that the Gospel must cease to oppose the customs of the dominant life but because her proposal should ensure people the freedom of decision. The Church can no longer use the power of institutions to support herself.”<sup>9</sup>

### 3) What to do?

In the profound crisis of faith favored by the spread of secularism, nihilism and moral relativism—all of which lie in wait to snare the person’s intellect and conscience—“it is more important,” Benedict XVI says, “that the Catholic Faith be presented in a new and dynamic way and reveal herself to be a power of unity, solidarity and openness to the eternal.”<sup>10</sup>

“Faced with the goal of positivism and scientism, which deny the truth and consistency of anything that goes beyond the senses and is not able to be experienced, “the religious spirit must be regenerated,” says Benedict XVI, “so as to find new ways of expressing herself and making herself understood. People today no longer grasp instantaneously that the Blood of Christ on the cross was poured out in atonement for our sins. Although important and true formulae, they do not have a place in our way of thinking and in our view of the world. They need to be ‘translated’ and understood in a new way. For example, the concept of evil needs

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<sup>8</sup> S. Dianich, “Chiesa, che fare?” in *Il regno Attualità*, n. 20 (15 November 2010), 718.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI, *Luce del mondo. Il Papa, la Chiesa e i segni dei tempi. Conversation with Peter Seewald*, Vatican Press 2010, p. 164.

to be rethought. We can't just shove it into a corner and forget about it. It has to be rethought and transformed from the inside out."<sup>11</sup>

This is not easy to do because it means searching for new languages while remaining faithful to the truth of the Gospel: "We must always ask ourselves what elements concerning something that was at one time considered essentially Christian were in reality only the expression of a particular historical era. What is really essential? What belongs to the Gospel? What changes as the times change? What does not belong to it? When it comes down to it, what really matters is that we always make a proper distinction."<sup>12</sup>

What should we do? In a study dedicated to this theme, Severino Dianich rightly insists on the need to dialogue and to carry out pastoral work in keeping with the new horizons opened by Vatican Council II. We cannot help but make our own his conclusion:

"The Word of God proclaimed by Jesus was also a fully human word that even those who do not believe in his divinity can appreciate. To speak about Jesus and his message to the non-Christian world does not only mean offering it a proposal of faith. It also means submitting to the consideration and evaluation of people the proposal of the life of the man Jesus, whose human story represents a page in the history of all people, believers and non-believers alike. [...] By nature, every person has the ability to receive the same Gospel ideals, and even those who do not profess faith in Christ can cultivate and put these ideals into practice.

"It is true that the Gospel does not give us an answer to every ethical problem that arises, but it is also true that it give us much more. We cannot cite explicit Gospel passages to condemn abortion, euthanasia, stem-cell research, the injustice of unemployment and the refusal to welcome immigrants, but the fact that Jesus held every human being in the highest regard will always be for everyone a provocation capable of reawakening consciences and moving them to seek higher answers to the problems that trouble social and political life. [...]

"In these last years, the work of evangelization has been heavily conditioned by not only political issues. The involvement of priests and bishops in the pedophilia scandal and the charges of dishonest or illegal financial transactions on the part of ecclesiastical institutions have seriously undermined the moral authority of the Church. [...]

"It is certain that in the near future the Church will be 'stripped' in other ways...by a drop in numbers of the faithful, the loss of her influence on society, the reduction of her properties and her means of actions, etc. All this should bring with it only one regret: the regret for all the people who lose their faith because of this. [...] In greater poverty and with more sincere humility, she will acquire more freedom and, consequently, greater enthusiasm and daring in reaching out to everyone, not with the anxiety connected to facing adversaries but with the Word of the Gospel to be given to the world."<sup>13</sup>

This is the "new Christian springtime" that we are preparing for by responsibly living the current purification of the Church.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ivi.*, 192.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi.*, 200.

<sup>13</sup> Dianich S., *art.cit.*, 720f.