

# Crisis in the Church Today

**Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ**

The first comment I would like to make is that the title of this talk, Crisis in the Church Today, has nothing to do with the election of Francis, our new Pope. It was composed well before Pope Benedict announced his decision to retire. Not that I consider that a crisis in the Church. Rather the opposite: it is a positive step that can strengthen the Church by permitting it to choose a new Pope capable of confronting issues Pope Benedict himself said he no longer felt able to meet because of his age and ill-health. Hopefully this is precisely what the Cardinals have done in electing Francis as our new Pope, in spite of the fact of his being a Jesuit. I was privileged to know him when he was our Provincial in Buenos Aires. We pray for his success in confronting the many problems facing the Church and offer him our full support.

But to turn to the crises, the topic is so vast and complex that it is difficult to know where to start. I feel a bit like the proverbial mosquito in a nudist colony; it is all very nice but where to begin?

A necessary first step is to limit the scope. In 1900 there were 459 million Catholics in the world, 392 million of whom lived in Europe or North America. Christianity a hundred years ago was an overwhelmingly white, first-world phenomenon. By 2000 there were 1.1 billion Catholics, with just 380 million in Europe and North America and the rest, 720 million, in the Global South. Africa alone went from 1.9 million Catholics in 1900 to 130 million in 2000, which has been described as “the most rapid and sweeping transformation of Catholicism in its 2000-year history”. Sooner or later the Church will have to come to terms with such a dramatic shift in its centre of gravity. For it makes no sense that Europe, with less than a quarter of its membership, should continue to account for nearly three-quarters of the cardinals who qualify to elect a new Pope. However, this talk will be confined to the Catholic Church in Europe and the United States, though I am fully aware that these can no longer be considered the global church’s key areas, at least demographically.

For once however there does seem to be an obvious starting point. I am referring to the famous interview given by Cardinal Martini<sup>1</sup> a couple of days before his death but only published after it and which was described as his spiritual testament. As you may remember, he said he felt the Church was 200 years behind the times. And I quote: “The Church is tired in affluent Europe and in America. Our culture has grown old, our Churches are big, our religious houses are empty, the bureaucracy of our Churches is growing out of proportion, our liturgies and our vestments are pompous.....Karl Rahner liked to use the image of embers hidden under the ash. In the Church today I see so much ash covering the embers that I’m often overcome by a sense of impotence.” The rest of the interview carries suggestions of what needs to be done, to which I shall return.

Similar sentiments have been repeated by so many. I limit myself to three short examples. In a book entitled *Unfinished Journey: the Church 40 years after Vatican II*, Austin Ivereigh writes: “Today there is a sense of disappointment among many Catholics that the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have been truncated, ignored, or even undermined in the contemporary Church, which continues to suffer from clericalism, centralism, male domination and institutional defensiveness. There is

a sense of a journey unfinished." In his book *Take the Plunge* Timothy Radcliffe agrees: "There is a deep unease that the Church is stuck or even retreating. To take again the example of my own Church, after the Vatican Council many Catholics dreamed of a Church that would be radically transformed. Almost fifty years later, this has not happened." Thirdly, and perhaps more predictably, Hans Küng in his *The Catholic Church: a Short History* writes at length of "a betrayal of the Council, a betrayal which has alienated countless Catholics from the church all over the world."

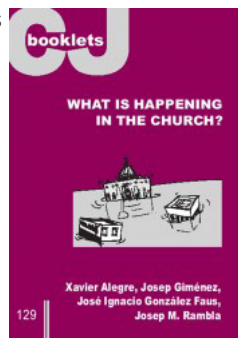
These opinions are supported by disturbing statistics such as those given by Alex Wright, ex-director of the Student Christian Movement, in his book *Why Bother with Theology?* They highlight the fact that we are living in an age and part of the world where "Christianity or any religious practice seem to have lost their meaning for the great majority of people". Less than 8% of people attend Sunday worship, less than a quarter are members of any church, fewer than half of couples get married in church and over a third cohabit without marriage, and so on. A more recent UK study predicts that church attendance is falling so rapidly that, within a generation, the majority of Christian churches will no longer be financially viable and therefore facing closure. Alex Wright goes so far as to say: "In the end, it may be God's will that Christianity is to die out in the secular West."

Clearly some of these problems are shared not only by the churches but by society as a whole. Two that are often quoted are secularism and post-modernity. The first, as we have already seen, is a rejection of the Christian message because to many it seems irrelevant to the real problems facing us and society seems to operate just as well – or perhaps even better – without it. Post-modernity reinforces the desire to rely on self in a reality that rejects ultimate goals or even a sense of direction. Hence any notion of an inherent common good or an accepted objective for the development of society gives way to an individualism in which all people is an island whose duty is to fend for themselves.

This talk was composed before the scandal and resignation of Cardinal Keith O'Brien, yet another example, a particularly sad and painful one, of a cleric accused and guilty of sexual abuse. However, apart from mentioning it here and now, I shall say nothing more on this topic nor on the disgraceful way some church authorities have tried to cover up the problem. This is not because I don't consider it a serious crisis in the Church. On the contrary, it is an extremely serious crisis that has probably destroyed the faith and trust of many. As Christians, we should be thoroughly ashamed and humble enough not only to admit this but also to beg pardon of God and of all those who have been wounded. My reason is that so much has already been said that there is nothing new I can add, and I want to avoid just repeating what I am sure you already know. However for those especially concerned, I would merely like to recommend the study *The Dark Night of the Catholic Church* edited by Brendan Geary and Joanne Marie Greer in which 17 experts cover every aspect of the problem and make helpful suggestions for dealing with it.

Most of what I propose to say is based on a study undertaken by our powerful Jesuit think-tank in Barcelona, *Cristianisme i Justícia*, and published under the title *What is happening in the Church?* (henceforth referred to as the work of the Cij Authors)<sup>2</sup>. It opens with the following words: "For years now, our society is becoming increasingly

conscious of a deep crisis in the Catholic Church. For some, this represents a confirmation of the end of Christianity. For others it represents something that could be described as a regression or a 'winter-time' of the Church". It then suggests five reasons or causes for this which it describes as 'Wounds of the Church today'. I propose to look at each of these in turn since I believe they can help us understand not only what the problems are but also where or how we might find some solutions. And I shall end by adding a sixth wound of my own, and then return to the interview with Cardinal Martini and the suggestions he offers for possible solutions.



### **First wound: The focus on hierarchy**

The first wound, the focus on hierarchy, goes right against one of the key changes advocated in the Second Vatican Council. One of its crucial moments, which took place near the beginning, was the Council's rejection of the text prepared by the Roman Curia for the Constitution on the Church which put the hierarchy first, followed by the clergy and then the laity. This was the order that had been followed up till then which gave rise to the sardonic description of the laity's role as being 'to pray, pay and obey'. Vatican II began its definition of the Church as 'the people of God', and saw it as a communion rather than a hierarchical structure.

In *Ad Gentes* it declared: "The Church has not been really founded and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among the people, unless there is a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy". In other words, the duty of the hierarchy is to promote and safeguard a real collegiality in a Church in which all its members have a voice and are free to express it. This should clearly include the freedom to discuss such issues as different methods of birth control or a non-celibate priesthood. There should be no list of forbidden topics, even if some might appear to contradict the Church's official teaching.

Not only has this *not* happened but, on a number of issues and in various places especially in the Vatican itself, the Church seems to be moving in the opposite direction. That great ecclesiologist Yves Congar, whom John Paul II made a cardinal and called "a gift from God to His Church", described the process as follows: "Rome has practically eliminated the very reality of the ecclesia and thus reduced it to a group that is dependent on it. The Roman Curia is everything. .... Rome is not really influenced by anything other than its own existence and its own authority, and is undoubtedly of the belief that it can serve God in this way".

The rest of this talk could easily be filled with examples of decisions made by Church authorities that go against collegiality, but I am sure you know and have probably experienced some yourselves. Even a national hierarchy can be controlled and overruled as we recently saw in the imposition of the new English translation of the Mass which replaced a far better one already approved by national hierarchies. But there is one example I cannot pass by in silence, and that is the unequal treatment of women by the official Church and their relegation to an inferior position in its governance and pastoral ministry. Whether or not the decision is one day taken to admit them to the priesthood, their human rights should be respected and honoured

as of now. The Cij Authors write: "Today's official Catholicism scandalises society by its narrow-mindedness towards women.....Changes need to be made, even if it is only out of gratitude towards those women who are largely responsible for the survival of the Church, and also because this dominant form of patriarchy is extremely damaging to the Church".

What needs to be done? Again I am sure you could make many suggestions, but I would like to end this section with the list offered by the Cij Authors: "Pope Paul VI underlined his hope for equality and participation as being the two virtues of our time in which is reflected the true dignity of mankind. And yet this dual hope does not have anywhere to go in the current structure of the Church, and this represents a major obstacle. The specific steps that this requires have been expressed many times: that the Pope not be Head of State, and that his church representatives in each country do not enjoy the political status of ambassadors: the suppression of the Cardinalate as an office and a reform of the Papal election; participation of local churches in the election of their ministers; giving deliberative functions to the Synod of Bishops by way of collegiality, rather than just consultative ones; a far-reaching revision of the proceedings of the Congregation of the Faith; and a serious and detailed look at the role of women in the Church, of which we should be ashamed. These reforms are not 'solutions' in themselves, but we believe that they would revive the health and credibility of the Church".

### **Second wound: "ecclesiocentrism"**

The second wound identified by the Cij Authors is connected with the first and described by the inelegant word 'ecclesiocentrism'. This refers more to the role of the Christian in the world rather than as a member of a church. Once again there are two different ecclesiologies that seem to be struggling with each other. One understands the community of believers in accordance with the language of the Gospels, as being like the yeast, or like grains of salt or seeds. The other understands the Church as more of a stronghold, as an institutional power that will compete with the secular powers to impose its own way of thinking. One is reminded of Cardinal Hume's famous 'dream' or 'vision' during the 5th General Synod of Bishops on The Role of the Christian Family. As he put it: "It is sometimes better to know the uncertainties of Abraham's tent than to sit secure in Solomon's temple".

In its lengthy discussion on the Church's role in the modern world, Vatican II not only defines the help she strives to give society but also emphasises the help the Church receives from the modern world. "She gratefully understands that in her community life no less than in her individual sons and daughters she receives a variety of assistance from people of every rank and condition.....Indeed, the Church admits that she has greatly profited – and still profits – from the antagonism of those who oppose or persecute her" (*Gaudium et Spes*).

But once again the Cij Authors declare: "We fear that, even though Vatican II signified a clear and definitive choice for the first of the models described, today the Church is blatantly withdrawing to the second option". This is why it is more concerned with its authority than its mission. It believes it must collaborate with mankind in an imposing way rather than through dialogue because it sees itself as being in possession of the answers to all the questions of history. So it feels called upon to impose the truth in an

authoritative way and is more ready to proclaim the benefits it has brought to mankind rather than the benefits mankind has brought to the Church.

This is perhaps understandable on a human level. It is natural to seek privileges and power, so as to be well accepted and believed, but this is not what Jesus promised his disciples. And when he chided them for arguing among themselves as to who should be reckoned the greatest, He told them clearly: "The greatest among you must behave as if he were the least, the leader as if he were the one who serves" (Lk, 22,26). This is the model of a Church that could attract many, whereas the authoritative model is off-putting and repugnant especially to those today who reject or resist authority but often are genuinely searching for guidance in their lives. Therefore it seems accurate and right to describe this as a wound, a crisis facing today's Church.

### **Third wound: the division of Christians**

The third wound, the division of Christians, has been long with us and is familiar to us all. But there is a danger of taking it for granted and forgetting that Vatican II described it as a great sin contradicting the express will of Christ who prayed that all be "completely one" (Jn 17,22). For this reason the Council declared that the Catholic Church felt ready and called to work with all Christian denominations in search of unity. It stated: "Our hearts embrace those brothers and communities not yet living with us in full communion. To them we are linked nonetheless by our profession of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and by the bond of charity. We are mindful that the unity of Christians is today wanted and desired by many, too, who do not believe in Christ. For the further it advances towards truth and love under the powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit, the more this unity will be a harbinger of unity and peace for the world at large" (*Gaudium et Spes*). And certainly over the past fifty years much progress has been made in increasing the understanding and cooperation between the churches.

However this is not the impression communicated by some of the officials in the Catholic Church today, both in the vocabulary they use and the steps they take or have taken. They imply that some churches have separated from the real Church and that what needs to be done to restore unity is for these churches to return to the Mother Church. In this way they have distorted a text that Vatican II deliberately corrected when it said that the Church of Christ "is present in" the Catholic Church, rather than "is" the Catholic Church (see *Lumen Gentium*).

In the UK, another sign is the fact that the Anglo-Catholic dialogue process (ARCIC) which made such remarkable advances and published two positive statements full of hope on the Eucharist and Ordination, now seems to have fizzled out through lack of support, if not clear opposition, from above.

All too often the Catholic Church seems to forget that it is a pilgrim Church, still on a journey, still searching, and therefore confronted by the need to search for and accept change. Yet change is so often resisted. Why should this be so? A recent biography of Bill Ryan, ex-Jesuit Provincial in Canada and for many years director of the Washington-based Centre of Concern, has this explanation to offer: "Institutions as old and complex as the Roman Catholic Church – arguably the oldest and likely one of the most complex on the planet – certainly do not change easily, particularly when headed by a self-perpetuating and unaccountable leadership whose prevailing response to

change has historically been to hunker down and adopt a siege mentality”.

#### **Fourth wound: the hellenisation of Christianity**

The Hellenisation of Christianity refers to its expression within a specific culture and mentality, in this case the Greco-Roman. It was certainly a great achievement to realize such an identification at the outset of Christianity, but the Cij authors fear that modern-day Christianity is showing itself incapable of doing the same in today's world. As they point out, our way of questioning and defining reality is not the same as that of the Greco-Roman world. “This is why a large majority of the dogmatic formulations of the faith of the Church, which clearly have an indisputable value, seem so incomprehensible to today's society and devoid of meaning”.

There are numerous signs of this in the official Church's dismissal of many innovative ideas and attempts to preach or write a message more acceptable and understandable to our modern world. And though some have undoubtedly contained inaccuracies or even errors, they were prophetic voices needed by the Church that could have been corrected rather than suppressed. Together with the stand against modernism with its focus on religious experience, a more recent and perhaps familiar example is the attempt of liberation theologians to promote a faith that started from the poor and oppressed peoples of the third world and was therefore meaningful and appealing to them. This attempt was openly discouraged by the Congregation of the Faith and has now almost been silenced.

As the Cij authors state: *“There are authoritative figures who believe that the Greco-Latin angle given to Christianity is the best, if not the only possible, option for today and the future”*. But it was for this reason that Pope John XXIII summoned the Vatican Council for, as he put it: *“The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another...The Christian, Catholic and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward towards a doctrinal penetration ... through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought...If it were only a matter of repeating what has gone before, a Council was not necessary”*. To refuse such an updating – and often to react to it through virtual witch-hunts, official disapproval, restrictions and bans – cannot but be considered a serious wound in today's Church.

#### **Fifth wound: forgetting the importance of the poor**

The Cij authors put this wound in the first place because they considered it the most important. I have changed the order and put it last, not because I think it is less important but because it is closely linked to an additional sixth wound I want to suggest myself.

A Preferential Option for the Poor became an accepted part of ecclesiastical jargon and policy in the 1980s. This was largely due to the two conferences of Latin American Bishops in Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979 which profoundly influenced the universal Church. The first, though it did not use the expression, recognised that “a deafening cry pours from the throats of millions asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else”. From this came the commitment “to make ours their problems and their struggles”. The second declared formally the need “for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation”.

The way was also prepared by the 1971 Synod of Bishops on *Justice in the World* which again, without using the formula, recognised “the Church’s vocation to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and joy to the afflicted”. And it confirmed the right of the poor to take their future into their own hands and the Church’s duty to give witness to justice by first being just herself.

This option was taken up by many religious congregations. In 1983 the Jesuits adopted it at their 33rd General Congregation in these words: *“The validity of our mission will also depend to a large extent on our solidarity with the poor. For though obedience sends us, it is poverty that makes us believable. So, together with many other religious congregations, we wish to make our own the Church’s preferential option for the poor. This option is a decision to love the poor preferentially because there is a desire to heal the whole human race. Such love, like Christ’s own, excludes no one but neither does it excuse anyone from its demands. Directly or indirectly this option should find some concrete expression in every Jesuit’s life, in the orientation of our existing apostolic works, and in our choice of new ministries”*.

Four years later this option was extended officially to the whole Church by John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. He writes: *“This is an option or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods”*.

The Church’s teaching on this point, therefore, could hardly be clearer. But it is contradicted by the reality of the world in which we live. Never in the whole of history has there been so much wealth in the world and never has it been so unequally divided. Alex MacGillivray in his book on *Globalisation* claims that the world’s capital assets have grown tenfold since 1980 and now stand at around \$118 trillion. If shared equally, every man, woman and child on the planet would have \$20,000 of capital. But people in the USA, Europe and Japan own 83% of it, while nearly half the world’s population struggles to exist on less than \$2 a day.

Year after year the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) underlines this fact with statistics that can only be described as shocking. I will spare you these, here merely mentioning that the experts distinguish between ‘relative poverty’, when a one-income family cannot cover basic needs in food, health, education, housing or clothing, and ‘absolute poverty’ when it cannot cover basic needs in just food alone. There are at least 1.2 billion people in this latter category. I can’t resist one final statistic from the 1998 UNDP Report which, though outdated, is now probably even worse on an updated basis: *“People in Europe and North America now spend \$37 billion a year on petfood, perfumes and cosmetics. This figure would provide basic education, water and sanitation, basic health and nutrition for all those now deprived of it and still leave \$9 billion over”*. This situation, described by some as ‘unbalanced’ and by others as ‘outrageous’ or ‘grotesque’ is actually getting worse all the time. While some countries, such as India and China, have made spectacular advances, the overall picture is one of regression and growing poverty amidst the ostentatious wealth of a few.



One of the saddest aspects of this situation is that the experts have a good idea of what needs to be done to right it, but that little or nothing gets done. The failure is not in knowledge, technology, nor even finance, but in the political will of both leaders and the people who keep them in power. As I am sure you know, in the year 2000 the largest gathering ever of Heads of State signed the UN Millennium Declaration which committed both rich and poor countries to achieving 8 specific goals each with clear and realisable targets by the year 2015. As we get ever nearer to this date, a recent UNDP Report shows that many of the goals already appear unattainable since “the world as a whole is moving away from them rather than towards them”.

But perhaps for us the most disturbing statement of all comes from the Cij Authors. In spite of the magnificent charitable work done by so many, the Church, especially in its officials and leaders, seems to be part of the problem rather than its solution. They claim that the Church *“which represents the God of the Bible, is not in any way a ‘Church of the Poor’ (John XXIII). We as a Church offer the poor a form of fatherly benevolence, but we have not yet managed to manifest this radical love towards them that would translate as a sacrament of God’s love. Instead it seems as though we behave towards these victims just as the rest of the world does; we treat them lukewarmly and merely to satisfy our own conscience, in the hope that those excluded from society won’t bother us too much.... If we may put it bluntly, we seem to represent much more a Church of the rich than a Church of the poor”*. Little wonder that this wound was placed first!

### **Sixth wound: neglect of the church’s social teaching**

Perhaps one of the main causes of the previous wound is the general neglect and even ignorance, among both lay people and clerics, of the Church’s social teaching. Austin Ivereigh, already quoted above, in another more recent book, *Faithful Citizens*, asks why the Church’s social teaching remains a mystery to most Catholics; why does it remain “outside the mainstream of ordinary parish life, is seldom referred to in the pulpit, almost never mentioned in the RCIA programme for people becoming Catholics, and is very unlikely ever to be taught as part of catechesis and formation programmes”? Why does it live up to the description given in a well-known collection: “our best-kept secret”?

And this in spite of the fact that almost all of the recent papal encyclicals, beginning with Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 down to Pope Benedict’s *Caritas in Veritate* three years ago, are not only deeply concerned with applying the Church’s social teaching to modern problems but call on Catholics to study it and put it into practice as part of their religious faith. This charge was repeated by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in their statement on *The Common Good*: “All members of the Catholic Church must accept their full share of responsibility for the welfare of society. We should regard the discharge of these responsibilities as no less important than fulfilling our religious duties and indeed as part of them”.

In *Caritas in Veritate* Pope Benedict makes a clear call for a new world order capable of dealing with the new, and not so new, problems that characterise today’s world and seem especially relevant at the present time. Among them he identifies:

- making profit the exclusive goal of economic activity
- growing inequality in the distribution of the world’s wealth



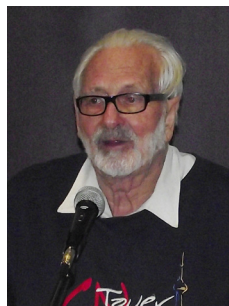
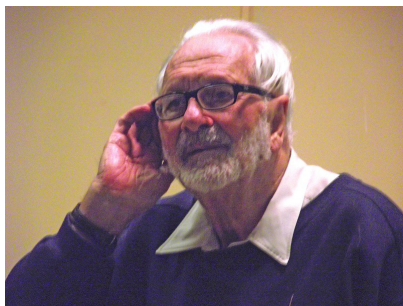
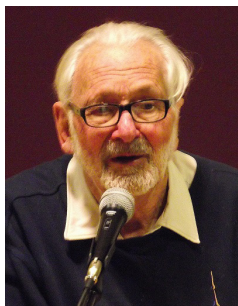
- the insufficiency of purely economic and technological progress
- the lack of control of international trade and finance and the agencies involved in them
- increasing world hunger

Another notable example is the study carried out by the Latin American Bishops of CELAM (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano) on globalisation in which they claim: *“Properly understood and guided, globalisation could provide sufficient food and a dignified life for all the planet’s inhabitants. It would be capable of a healthy transfer of technology which would make it possible to destroy the scandalous differences that currently exist among peoples. For globalisation to bear fruit, however, it must be diverted from its current neoliberal economic path and guided towards the building up of all society. It is a challenge for Christians to show that beyond the profit motive and unbridled competition among individuals and countries, in a deregulated market, the common values of collaboration, exchange, solidarity and responsibility can be developed. Only in this way will globalisation cease to crush the weak and be a threat, and instead become an immense opportunity for all humanity”.*

This is why the Church’s social teaching is so important. The charitable work done by the Church, though still essential and much needed, is no longer sufficient to build a more just world. It is social structures that have to be changed and mankind now has the necessary knowledge to do this. For the first time in human history we can plan and build the sort of society we want. The Church’s social teaching has a key role to play here since it can show us the sort of society that accords with Gospel principles and help us to build it.

Catholic social teaching does not oppose market economies but does require that human beings and their relationships with others must be the central focus, that their dignity and freedom must be respected, that goods should be used for the benefit of all, and that the legitimate right to property should be respected but also properly exercised. Therefore it rejects indiscriminate consumption, lack of concern for those who are marginalised and lack of respect for the environment. It considers that any economic model supporting these values is unrealistic, unstable and immoral. And it is clear that a culture based on ‘having’ and ‘enjoying’ more than on ‘being’ destroys people and fosters lifestyles that are contrary to freedom, justice and the welfare of those who are poorest.

These two examples should prove beyond doubt that, if a church or any of its members ignores its social teaching, they and the world are being deprived of what



should be a most valued possession and useful tool. But the Church's social teaching in itself is not enough unless it leads to a genuine change in basic attitudes. "If the task of evangelization is not supported by witness or by living what we preach, it is nothing more than empty deceptive rhetoric". Many notable Christians, lay people and clergy, have given heroic witness to what they believe, and some have paid a high price for doing so. I personally cannot forget the example of Archbishop Romero and so many others of El Salvador or of the six Jesuit martyrs of Central America with their housekeeper and her 15-year-old daughter. But I am well aware these are more the exceptions than the rule, and they are not representative of the majority of Christians, including myself, in today's world.

It is good to reflect sometimes on how others, including non-Christians, see the Church and ourselves. Here is a reflection from Julius Nyerere, first President of Tanzania, introducer of the *ujamaa* (familyhood) system of collectivisation, and himself a devout RC whose cause for beatification has been introduced: *"So the world is not one, its peoples are divided now, and also more conscious of their divisions, than they have ever been before. They are divided between those who are satisfied and those who are hungry; they are divided between those with power and those without power; they are divided between those who dominate and those who are dominated, between those who exploit and those who are exploited. And it is the minority which is well fed and the minority which has secured control of the world's wealth and of their fellow men. Further, in general, that minority is distinguished by the colour of their skin, and by their race. And the nations in which most of the minority of the world's people live have a further distinguishing characteristic – their adoption of the Christian religion."* Julius Nyerere



## Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to return to the interview with Cardinal Martini. He suggested three important ways for combating the 'tiredness' or ineffectiveness of the Church today. The first is conversion: *"The Church must recognise her own errors and must pursue a radical path of change, beginning with the Pope and the bishops."* But is 'a radical path of change' a realistic proposition? We have already seen how the need for change is so often resisted in organisations as old and complex as the Roman Catholic Church. As the well-known hymn puts it: *"Change and decay in all around I see. O Thou who changest not, abide with me"*.

Yet we know from our own experience that change is an essential part of growth and must therefore be part of any conversion. As Cardinal Newman famously put it: *"To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often"*. And if change is resisted for too long, it is likely to be eventually enforced by circumstances. The example Martini offers are questions about sexuality. He says: *"Questions about sexuality and about all the themes connected to the human body are a good example. These are important questions for everyone and sometimes they seem even too important. We have to ask ourselves if people are still listening to the advice of the Church regarding sexuality. Is the Church still an authoritative point of reference in this field or has it just become a caricature in the media?"*

The second suggestion concerns the Word of God, the Bible which the Second Vatican Council returned to the laity. He emphasises that *"Neither the clergy nor canon law is a substitute for a personal response. All the external rules, laws and dogmas we have are aimed at clarifying that internal voice and discerning the spirit within us."* It is therefore the duty of each individual Christian, as Pope Paul VI so strongly put it: *"without waiting passively for orders or directives, to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which they live."*

Martini's third suggestion concerns the sacraments and is both radical and welcome. He stresses that *"The sacraments are not an instrument to discipline people but to help them on their journey of life and in their weaker moments. Do we bring the sacraments to those people who need new strength? I think of all those who are divorced and remarried, all the enlarged families. They are in need of special protection."* It is worth quoting in full the suggestion he then offers.

*"The attitude that we take towards these extended families will determine the way in which the next generation responds to the Church. A woman is abandoned by her husband but finds a new partner who takes care of her and her three children. This second love story is a successful one. If this family is discriminated against, then not only the mother but also her children will be excluded. If the parents feel outside the Church or don't feel its support, the Church will lose the next generation. Before Communion we pray 'Lord, I am not worthy'. We know that we are not worthy... Love is a grace. Love is a gift. The question whether or not divorced people can receive Communion should be turned on its head: how can the Church help to bring the strength of the sacraments to those who have complex family situations?"*

I conclude with the reminder that God promises a safe landing, not a calm passage. The fact that there are crises in the Church should neither surprise nor depress us. This is precisely what Jesus Christ himself promised his followers. This does not however

mean we should just fold our arms and accept them. They need to be resisted and, where possible, resolved. They should rather spur us on to follow Our Lord with a stronger and deeper faith.

But what is true faith? Travelling round London on the bus or by tube and looking at the faces of the people around me, I am often struck by the thought that some of them, though perhaps belonging to no particular religion or church, probably have a far greater faith than I, a so-called 'professional religious'. I am reminded of the Gospel story of the Roman centurion who asked Our Lord to cure his dying son which Our Lord did because, as he said, *"I have not found such great faith in Israel"*. It reminds us that we, Catholics or Christians, have no monopoly on the faith, and that there are many others, belonging to different religions or none at all, who possess and live a far greater faith than ourselves. It is a faith that often expresses itself not in outward observances but in a dedication to another person or cause for which they offer their lives and which is stronger than the desire to seek their own pleasure and comfort.

That is why Archbishop Romero, explaining what it means to offer one's life, gave this beautiful description: *"To give one's life is not just being killed by someone; to give one's life is to have the spirit of martyrdom, to give through one's duty, in silence, in prayer, in the faithful performance of one's obligations, in that silence of daily life, to go on giving one's life, like the mother who, without fuss, with the simplicity of maternal martyrdom, gives birth, suckles her child, helps it grow and looks after it with love. This is to give one's life."* And this is the real expression of true faith, the invitation God is making to each one of us at this particular moment.

M.C-J SJ

#### Notes

1. Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini was Archbishop of Milan for more than twenty years. A Jesuit, and a Biblical scholar, he was known for his progressive views. He died in August 2012 aged 85.
2. Booklet Number 129 of Cristianisme i Justícia was published in March 2008. The five authors were Xavier Alegre, Josep Giménez, José Ignacio, González Faus and Josep M Rambla.