

The Church In Dilemma: An Opinion!

by Ronny Gartner



On the day of yesterday, in the early hours of the approaching dawn, the Roman Catholic Church passed away. Attempts to save the deceased came too late, as an accurate diagnosis was left until no hopes of survival remained. It will be lovingly remembered by some for its familiarity, and for the security and protection it provided from thought provocation. Its age was old, its time long passed. The deceased's inability to listen, to keep pace with the forward advancement through time of its people, caused its eventual demise. A twinge of sorrow is felt by many, not because of the passing itself, but because of the wanted potential that the Church failed to develop. The memory it leaves behind will be short, and belong only to a few. Sadly, this is a passing which begs to be forgotten. May the deceased rest in peace, so the living can go on living life as it is.

The article looks at the Roman Catholic Church, and its people, from a 'lay' person's point of view. I intend to discuss the issues raised from the perspective of how they affect the laity, meaning the people, not part of the officialdom or clergy of the Church. The objective of this article is to challenge, to cause to think, the laity and hierarchical members of the Church.

The Roman Catholic Church, for various reasons, is facing serious difficulties. The majority of its priests are aged; few of its young men are inclined

towards giving their lives to the priesthood (recent Vatican figures show a 5.6 percent decline in the number of priests has occurred over the last nine years). Many adherents are apathetic and bored, while others have left the Church out of sheer frustration and anger. Of the adherents who remain, there are few for whom participation in the Church is any type of real spiritual experience. The majority sit through mass with faces blank and eyes glazed, singing and giving the expected responses in voices as weak as a whisper. Minds far away, they perform automatically. This majority attends Church functions because: they wish to be seen attending, it has become a habit to attend, their parents push them to attend, or because it was drilled into their heads that they *must* attend. Heads nod in attempts to doze, and very few listen to the readings or the words spoken by the priest. This is shown by the fact that few can remember the message delivered during mass shortly after leaving the Church. Many will praise one priest for finishing ten minutes early, while condemning another for finishing ten minutes late. They listen to the gossip of fellow parishioners, but not the words of the priest. The purpose of the weekly mass is to reinforce and reaffirm the parishioners* faith, yet few ever recall their religious obligations beyond the doors of the Church. To many, attendance at weekly mass completely fulfills that obligation. What has

caused this behaviour? Furthermore, what has caused the Church to be abandoned by a significant number of its people? I intend to answer these questions from a 'lay*' viewpoint.

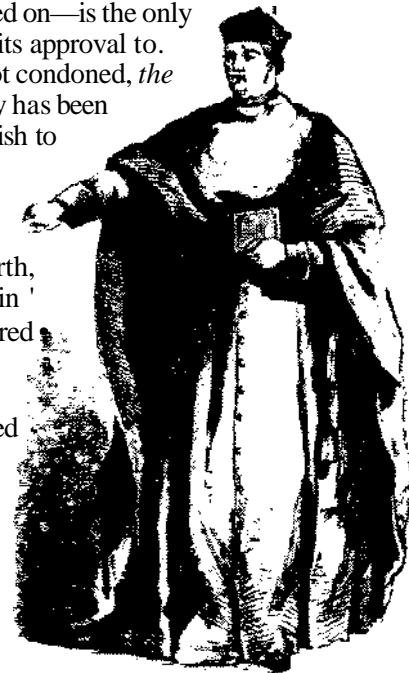
The parish priest, who enjoys a very low position in the Church's hierarchy, is only a minor causative agent of the Church's difficulties. This is despite the fact that the parishioners experience the majority of their contact with this official. For he is a protector of traditions, a tool of the hierarchy, and thus severely restricted in the amount of ingenuity he can bring to his job. The major causes originate up the hierarchy, where the officials decree and expect dogmatic acceptance. Through uncompromising stands on sensitive issues, and the continuation of bitterly disliked practices and teachings, the officialdom attempts to deny the humanness of the members of the Church. By rigidly ritualizing the services, allowing only token laity participation, they encourage the apathetical attitudes.

Indoctrination of the people is started at a very young and malleable age, and never ceases in its attempts to make them firm adherents, who exhibit blind, prejudiced, and unreasoning allegiance to the Church. Every mass is designed to further the indoctrination process. Rituals and response are repeated continuously, until they are automatic, habitual, their symbolism forgotten by many. It is no wonder the people are apathetical. The droning voice of the priest going through yet another monotonous service, begs to be ignored. Emotions the rituals might at one time have evoked are eroded, and eventually destroyed by repetition. Anyone who does show interest by asking questions, *is* strongly discouraged. Despite the fact that people are better informed today, and more likely to critically analyze and question, members of the Catholic community are expected to uninhibitedly accept the doctrines and rulings of the church. Questions pertaining directly to the faith are even discouraged, either by making the questioner feel somehow inadequate, or through responses like: "to believe without knowing is the greatest faith one can have", or "the answers *to* your questions will all come to you at your death." The officialdom does not seem to recognize that ignorance is a destitution of knowledge, an empty chasm in one's cognizance. Belief cannot be completed while such interruptions in its continuity remain. While asking the people to embrace their religion in its enrity, and indeed

pushing this idea through the indoctrination process, the Church stifles the asking of questions which might enable the questioners to do just that. While some questioners remain, persisting in their search for answers, many will attempt to go through the motions of the faith without really knowing why, slowly abandoning the Church as apathy sets in.

The officialdom further encourages abandonment by members through the uncompromising enforcement of doctrines and practices which are strongly opposed by the membership. Of the many who have left the Church, or no longer 'bother' to go, many put forward the sacrament of penance as one of the causes of their lack of participation. Penance is the practice of confession, where the members are expected, in confidence of course, to recite the sins they have committed to their parish priest. The priest assists them in their 'personal confrontation'. A 'bad boy', 'bad girl' syndrome seems to exist here, for the parishioners feel relegated to the level of a child during the practice of this sacrament. Today, despite the extreme unpopularity of this practice, and despite the membership's shown willingness to take part in penitential services (where the sins of the congregation are forgiven as a whole), the officialdom of the Church is again pushing the practice of individual confession.

Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church has taken an uncompromising stand on the issues of divorce and birth control. Consequently, many Catholics today find themselves caught in a moral dilemma. Natural family planning—a method of birth control not *fit* to be relied on—is the only method the Church will give its approval to. Because sex for pleasure is not condoned, *the* practice of periods of celibacy has been suggested for couples who wish to control the number of offspring they produce, but distrust the reliability of the approved method of birth control. A survey conducted in Quebec (the province considered to be the religious centre of Canada) in 1984, by two Montreal newspapers, revealed that 68.4 percent *oi* the Catholics surveyed opposed the Church's decrees against artificial birth control. Every



child has the right to have its basic survival needs supplied. The child's parents, who are responsible for supplying these needs, have the right to ensure they produce only the number of children for whom they are able to provide. The Church's ruling on birth control does not seem to recognize the existence of such needs.

The Montreal papers also surveyed the people on the Church's stand on divorce. The annulment of a Catholic marriage is allowed under only the most extreme circumstances. The survey showed 65.7 percent of their respondents disagreed with the Church's refusal to recognize divorce. Never again will the Church expect so much from its members, as it does during the choosing of a marital partner. Suddenly, wisdom beyond the average human capability is expected when the people involved are at a relatively young and inexperienced age. Yet through its teachings, the Church has shown it is aware of the profound and permanent influence on children, the home environment tends to have. Then it tries to ignore the scars a stressful environment can leave by refusing to recognize the fact that some marriages can and do fail. Reasonable attempts to repair troubled marriages are essential, but it is difficult to fathom what value the Church sees in the continuation of a marriage which continually brings pain to the family involved. It is also difficult to believe an institution's claims to love and compassion, when it is willing to cause the continuation of such emotional trauma. The Church's refusal to allow the use of artificial birth control methods, and its refusal to recognize divorce, affects a large segment of the Catholic community.

The members of the Catholic community expect to escape responsibility for problems within the Church. For through silence, they permit the continuation of unpopular practices and decrees. The majority remains quiet. Many simply ignore the teachings, or silently rebel through limited cooperation. Furthermore, the apathetic attitudes are contagious and dampening to the spirits of others. The priest cannot be expected to look out upon a sea of blank faces and glazed eyes, and yet himself remain enthusiastic; lack of feedback causes monotony. Few parishioners stop to speak to the priest at the conclusion of Sunday mass, just once witness the emptying of a Catholic church and you will know this to be true. Bodies which for the past hour appeared devoid of energy

and movement were instead, recharging, waiting for the last chords to leave the organ. Then, all that new energy comes surging up; like a mighty wave, the people head for the door. You can pick out the more 'devoted' parishioners, for they are plastered against the walls and pews, waiting for the stampede to recede before themselves venturing out. They remember their parents' words—in the case of a human stampede, press yourself against a wall, to avoid being crushed underfoot. Is *it* relevant to mention these wise parents were referring to a panic exit caused by a fire, and not an exodus from Church? The priest, bravely standing near the exit door, attempts to be available to the people. But the hands that reach out, the voices wishing him peace, do so at a phenomenal rate.

Does the overwhelming Canadian response to the Pope attack *the* credibility of this article? No! Respect for Pope and Church are continually drilled into the Catholic. Furthermore, publicity generated by the media and Vatican, prior to and during the papal visit, was incomparable. These two factors alone account for a considerable amount of that response. While some of the remaining response can be attributed to people attending for deeply felt religious reasons, much of it can be attributed to numerous other 'non-religious' reasons. Quebec, a province facing continuous problems in persuading its people to attend Sunday mass, had an incredible turnout for the papal visit. How long will the reawakening of religious fervor last? Few people believe it will be a long term change. The Pope further reaffirmed the Church's uncompromising stand on current teachings and rulings. The Vatican newspaper stated the Pope recognized the controversy of his words and believed many would reject them. The visit was a respite, but the degree of significant long term change it effected is questionable.

Finally, the Church can no longer claim to serve solely its reason for existence. For rather than its rules and regulations serving it, the Church serves them. Churchianity, rather than Christianity, seems to be the current norm. While most Churches have some good moral teachings, they are of little value if no one listens. Furthermore, practices which are supposed to benefit the membership of the Church, are of no value if the people rebel against them. While the officialdom can prescribe religious ordinances, the ultimate decision as to whether they will be accepted and

adhered to remains with the membership. There are few parishioners who can obey all the teachings of the Church. The officialdom and people of the Roman Catholic Church would do well to recognize that the current controversies and problems will not go away if ignored, and take corrective steps.

The apathetical attitudes must be recognized as existing. Steps should be taken to revitalize the parishioners, through innovation and variation, at the expense of ritualism. The people should be encouraged to ask questions. Open and honest answers must be provided as soon as the questioned official can find the answer, if the question is not immediately answerable. Granted, religion is a highly subjective matter, and there may not be, at our current theological level, answers for all questions. The questioner should be told this. Encouragement of questions might itself stimulate interest in the people. The Church must stop trying to ignore the humanness of its people. It is time for it to realize people can and do make mistakes when choosing marital partners. The Church must allow the people involved in the marriage to make the final decision on its fate, for they are in the best position to judge. If the decision is to divorce, then the Church can concentrate its energies on aiding the people through the transition. It is time for the Church to recognize the rights of children and parents, in relation to both divorce and birth control. Recognition of the needs of parents to be able to meet the survival needs of offspring they bear, should be shown through relaxation of the stand on birth control. The Church must realize that the people who abandoned the Church because of its current teachings, ordinances, and ritualism, will not be willing to come back to an unchanged situation, as it is now asking them to do. Rather than rein *in* its more distinctive theologians, the Church might try encouraging their divergence, and even consider their ideas. In fact, the present totalitarian leadership structure would do well to become more democratic. Finally, while the officials of the Roman Catholic Church are extremely powerful and domineering, they still need the membership. The members of the Catholic Community must realize that if they stood as a united group, and refusing to be pacified, demanded change and compromise, they would have *to* be listened to by the hierarchical members of the Roman Catholic Church.