

~ As the People of God you might also consider reflecting on ~

What you know now, versus what you knew 50 years go about your Church.
When was it your Church? Was it ever your Church"? Was it ever your Church?

Reflections on an Ordination Golden Anniversary

We are the Gaudium et Spes priests. We went into the seminary at the highest rate in living memory. We were ordained between 1955 and 1975 – in double the numbers our parishes required. Most of us were from the Silent Generation with a few years of Baby Boomers at the end. We took Vatican II to heart.

We changed from being priests called and consecrated by God to being **presbyters called and ordained by the Church – the People of God.**

Ecumenism became a normal way of thinking for us. Prepared for the challenge by Cardijn's apostolate of like to like, we were successful at educating a newly vital and active laity. We worked with the people rather than for them. We realised that clericalism was an evil, not a good, and discarded it with its style and culture. We ran highly successful and active parishes. Though ageing now, many of us are still on the job. Our presbyteral and pastoral lives have been a source of that unusual experience – joy.

But not without grief. We have experienced the awakening 60s, the exciting 70s, the suspicious 80s, the depressing 90s and the imploding 00s. During the 1980s we became aware that a lot was going wrong. Ordinations suddenly dropped after 1975. We started to lose parishioners – first from Mass then from affiliation. Both of these changes had mixed social causes.

Worse! Discordant decisions were coming down from the pope. Priestly celibacy, despite being highly contentious, was reasserted by Paul VI in 1967 without discussion. In 1968 *Humanae Vitae* was a shocking disappointment. Most of us never accepted it. Paul VI began appointing bishops opposed to the council's ethos. This was most notable in Holland which had become a trailblazer in implementing the council. Paul killed that initiative and we are all the worse off for that. The whole trend was demoralizing.

Then came John Paul II. Charismatic in front of the TV camera; brilliant at languages; but – out of touch in scripture and limited in theology, a bad listener and rock solid is his self-assessment as God's chosen man of destiny. His

whole life had been spent in the persecuted church of Poland with its fortress church mentality frozen in time.

The open dialogue of the Church with the new ideas and values arising out of new knowledge in scriptural criticism, theology, psychology, sociology, anthropology stopped. New scientific discoveries in genetics were treated with suspicion and their application usually condemned. Sexual mores were promoted to the top shelf of his panorama of sin – a bit of an obsession with him.

Power corrupts. The history of the papacy shows this pre-eminently. Unchecked potentates believe their own propaganda. Taken to the extreme, they claim infallibility. Pius IX bullied Vatican I into institutionalizing such a claim. Since then creeping infallibility has resulted in the pope and his theologically limited curia stealing the term “magisterium” from its real owners – the college of professional theologians. How can you conscientiously give assent of mind and heart to policies formed without theological debate, consultation, transparency or accountability? In contemporary government and business this would be judged unethical.

John Paul’s lust for power showed very early and was taken to monumental proportions. Accountable to nobody, John Paul moved against any opinion other than his own and removed many exponents of alternative opinions from teaching and publishing. His most powerful enforcer was the Ratzinger-led Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Other Roman dicasteries joined the campaign.

The CDF is the current euphemism for the Inquisition. True to its mediaeval roots, it assumes the pope to be entitled to enforce his views. It conducts its delations and proceedings in secret. In today’s secular world this is a violation of human rights.

Theological censorship justifies itself as the quest for the truth and poses as truth’s champion. In fact it is the enemy of the discovery of truth because discussion is forestalled. The contemporary secular world understands this and wisely enshrines freedom of speech and debate as a central value. The Church no less than any other enterprise is at least the poorer and at worst prone to error when it rejects this value.

All of us are abused by this process. The priest at the coal face is not consulted, yet is contemptuously expected to defend policies he and his people do not believe.

John Paul II also enforced much of his own devotional life on the church at large. Despite Vatican II he effectively stopped the third rite of Penance, reversed a burgeoning dynamic theology of Eucharist by reverting to and re-emphasising devotion to the static Real Presence, reinforced a distorted devotion to Mary based on fundamentalist theology and introduced peculiar devotions such as Sr. Faustina's Divine Mercy Devotion which undercuts Easter – the climax of our liturgical year.

A more grievous abuse of power by John Paul II was his appointment of bishops. Appointees were to be clerical, compliant and in total agreement with his personal opinions. This has emasculated the leadership of the Church. The episcopal ranks are now low on creativity, leadership, education and even intelligence. Many are from the ranks of Opus Dei – reactionary, authoritarian and decidedly not creative. Many, often at the top of the hierarchical tree, are embarrassingly ignorant of any recent learning in scripture, theology and scientific disciplines. Many are classic company boys. Some of the more intelligent and better educated seem to have sold their souls for advancement. Can they really believe the line they channel? Ecclesiastical politics have trumped integrity. And when these men are appointed as the leaders of priests without any consultation they become a standing act of contempt.

Worse still, this happened over a period when the priesthood held its biggest proportion of intelligent, educated and competent leaders. It was those very qualities which blackballed them for appointment under the blinkered but powerful regime. Our best chance has been missed. Today the ranks of the priesthood are depleted due to low recruitment over the last forty years. The pool from which future bishops must be chosen is very shallow.

A newly critical laity questions policy but receives no answers. Why can't women be leaders in the Church? Why do priests have to be celibate? What is wrong with contraception? Why alienate remarried divorcees? Why this salacious preoccupation with sexual mores? Why are scientific advances always suspected of being bad? Why can't we recognise the reality of homosexual orientation – and the social consequences of that recognition? Have we learnt nothing from the Galileo case – or the treatment of Teilhard de Chardin? Can't we escape the Syllabus of Errors mentality?

Benedict XVI has continued the reversal of Vatican II. He is imposing a new English translation of the Sacramentary on a resisting English speaking constituency. This may very well backfire because many priests are not going to implement it. Benedict has received back bishops from the schismatic Society of St Pius X. He has encouraged the Tridentine Mass in Latin. He has

reintroduced kneeling for communion on the tongue at his public Masses – all deliberate key pointers to regression from the spirit of Vatican II. To the priests who embraced Vatican II they are iconic insults.

Then he has the nerve to decree a Year for Priests in 2009 with St John Vianney as patron. Like Fr. Donald Cozzens, many felt they were being played. The celebration of the importance of priests in the church is belied by the contempt with which they are treated. How can Rome call priests to repentance when it is so recalcitrant; so slow to admit any failing of its own? How can they be serious in stressing the importance of the priest as confessor when it is clear that confession has all but vanished from the life of the Church? How can they urge Holy Hours and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament when most priests have moved on from that static theology of Eucharist to a dynamic one – with Vatican II leading the way? How can they urge priests to more intense prayer when they show no evidence of a change of heart or attitude – the genuine indicator that prayer is working?

We took as normal the world and the church into which we were ordained. In reality, the religious affiliation of the period was abnormally high. Mass and sacramental participation and priestly vocations were at a high water mark. The reversal which began in the late 60s was always going to happen. But with Vatican II we had the tools to handle the new situation. A large group of the priests were ready to meet the challenge. They did not get the chance. The orders from above were to withdraw to the fortress and sing the old song. Instead of embracing the new they lost the opportunity and left us high and dry – and disappointed.

In the western world priests still always rate highly in job satisfaction surveys. They generally enjoy their job and do it well. That is because they are happy in their own patch. But they feel betrayed by the pope and the bishops. If you ask them what they think about the powers up top and where the official show is going you get a very different answer.

<http://theswag.org.au/2010/12/reflections-on-an-ordination-golden-anniversary/>