

The Catholic Dilemma



Roman Catholics have protested, had millions of the faithful sign petitions, and prayed for changes to be made in their Church. Yet, few of the changes that were expected after Vatican II have come to pass. The number of priests continues to dwindle; women are not allowed in the ranks of the ordained, and the Vatican is now on the verge of shunning gay laity and ousting gay priests (who make up a substantial percentage of the clergy). Rumors have it that plans are also being laid to return the liturgy to a more baroque form, reminiscent of the Tridentine Mass from before Vatican II.

In the midst of all the desire for change (and the lack of it), Roman Catholics actually face an even deeper question about the governance of the Church. This is not just a question of getting the Pope to change his mind on a few of the Church's practices. It is really about how the Church is governed. The "Old Catholics" who broke with the Vatican in the late 1800s - after rejecting the doctrine of papal infallibility - realized this deeper question and looked to the history of the Church. They discovered strong evidence that the papal authority was very different in the first 1000 years of the Church.

Early in the Church the desire for unity was not confused with the quest for uniformity. National Churches created their own liturgies, held synods to discuss doctrine and practices, and conferred with Rome over disputed matters. Rome functioned more like a supreme court rather than an empire. Ecumenical councils were held to discuss the beliefs of the Christian Churches of the East and the West.

The "Old Catholics" reconnected with this model of the Church. They proclaimed a tri-fold governance of the Church that included the voices of the bishop, the clergy and the people. This did not weaken the authority of the bishops. In fact it strengthened it in the face of the demands of the Roman Pope. Consensus among the bishop, clergy and people proved to be a strong formula. (For instance, the Old Catholic Church is the only one presently growing in Germany.)

Roman Catholics now face a dilemma. Do they simply petition Rome with hopes for changes in the practices of clerical celibacy, women's ordination, etc; or, do they leave the structure of a Church in which only one voice is heard and followed- the voice of the Pope of Rome - and enter a style of Catholicism that embraces democratic processes?

To leave the Roman structure is not to leave Catholicism. Certainly the Catholic tradition is alive in the Anglican Communion, the Union of Utrecht (Old Catholics), and the Orthodox Churches. These Churches have embraced a more democratic form of governance. In many, the bishops are elected by their people, and the voices of clergy and laity are heard in their synodal form of governance. Just look on the websites of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Episcopal Church or the Union of Utrecht. There you will find examples of governance that include many voices. This polity reflects a discernment of the Spirit in which the people, clergy and bishops of the Church participate.

Additionally, the choice to leave Roman polity is a structural change - not just a policy change. It does not change any tenet of faith, nor the constant belief and practice of sacramental ordination, the permanence of orders, or the historic episcopacy itself. These are continuous tenets of faith from Apostolic times. The change is a return to an earlier form of administration that was even practiced in Rome for the first millennium of the Church.

This is a return to the style of the early Church, in which the bishop had authority, but was elected by the people; and the bishop valued the participation of the clergy in decisions of the Church. The early Church was certainly more democratic in style than the medieval or modern versions of Roman Catholicism.

The great prophetic call of the **Ecumenical Catholic Communion** is that of inviting Catholics to realize their roots. We remind Catholics that they have the right to participate in choosing their leaders, and have a right to be heard by their ordained leaders. This is an affirmation of the Spirit - in which we all seek not to simply decide our future, but discern together the call of God. In this process every voice is important. This is not simply governance, but a reflection of the profound spirituality that is at the heart of our ancient "Catholic" identity.

By ECC Father Jim Farris, October 2009