

The Crisis of Confidence in the Catholic Church

Raymond G. Helmick, S.J.

Foreword by Gerard Mannion

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

*Foreword: Crisis and beyond: A new dawn for the
Catholic Church?* x

Preface xx

- 1 The nature of the crisis 1
- 2 How the Church has handled grave
crises in the past 15
- 3 The Monolith Church as it emerged
from the French Revolution 33
- 4 Between the two Vatican Councils:
The Church striving to find itself 53
- 5 Vatican Council II: Its first period, 1962 81
- 6 The Council without Pope John 103
- 7 Bringing the Council to its conclusion 129
- 8 Why was the Council so important? 155
- 9 The crisis begins to set in 177

10	Pope John Paul II	205
11	Sex scandal in the new millennium	233
12	What shall be done?	249
<i>Appendix: The final interview with Cardinal Carlo Martini</i>		267
<i>Abbreviations</i>		271
<i>Index</i>		273

PREFACE

Raymond G. Helmick, S.J.

On the evening of 8 February 2013, I thought I had finished the last chapter of this book. The chapter dealt with the reign of Pope Benedict XVI, which had left the crisis of confidence described here untouched, and speculated on what might lie ahead in another pontificate. Pope Benedict proved me wrong on Monday morning, 11 September, when he announced his resignation. My reading of the state of the Church had been rather glum. As a result of the events that followed that announcement, and the advent of Pope Francis, this has become a much happier book.

People have tended to trace the crisis of confidence to the sex abuse scandal, a situation that had been ongoing long before it suddenly became a paramount issue in 2002. It should be evident enough, though, that the falling away from Catholic practice, the loss of priests, and the scarcity of new priestly vocations had been underway long before.

I've chosen to trace the problems of the Catholic Church much farther back in its history. The concentration of Church leadership on control of the Christian population, their requiring of obedience to their rulings rather than on the Gospel values of Jesus, the defensiveness and self-righteousness in the face of any criticism, traceable to the time of Constantine, had served the Church ill in major times of crisis; notably, the eleventh-century period of divisive conflict between East and West and the Reformation crisis of the sixteenth century had served the Church ill, and it was consistent behavior through many centuries. Some heroes of the Church's history have won praise for their hardness in such circumstances.

After a long period of power, the Church had met open hostility from its own society in the French Revolution. Its frightened leadership had become disastrously out of step with the world it lived in through most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, vehemently opposed to the very things—growth of knowledge, technology, and civil freedom—we most value in those periods. The Church allied itself with the most regressive forces of those times, losing its contact with the abused industrial proletariat and having to rely on the patience and devotion of the rural peasantry. The reign of Pope Leo XIII and his initiation of a new social doctrine of the Church had seen a break in this blindness to the times, but the quest for control remained the characteristic of Church governance.

The special character of Pope John XXIII, his extraordinary experience of having to live Christian love under harrowing circumstances at many stages of his life, his understanding of Christian responsibility for the centuries-long terrorizing of Jews, prepared him to bring the Church to a time of remarkable insight into the Second Vatican Council which he initiated. John saw a Church in need of reform, and had learned from such theologians as Yves Congar how such a reform had to be conducted; *in* the Church rather than to it, governed by love of the Church as a communion in the love of God. Finding himself raised unexpectedly to the office of Pope, he called the Council almost at once. His prescription for it was expressed in his opening address. The Council should not be an occasion for condemnation but should bring the Church actively into the life of the world—*aggiornamento*; and not by departing from its ancient principles but by deep penetration into its original and essential sources—*ressourcement*. John's way of doing this was to *consult* the Church, not as a driver but as an enabler, allowing the assembled bishops the freedom to examine its conduct, its liturgy, its responsiveness to the Scriptural resources which were the channel of its tradition, its respect for the person in every way, its self-understanding. By that very fact he had put the bishops into full contact with the aspirations of their people and made possible, thus, a consultation of the entire Church.

The great pioneering Pope was dead after a first year of the Council, but he had accustomed his bishops to this freedom of examination. The sense of direction they gave to the Church addressed long-established and even ancient ways in which it had

failed to be faithful to the teachings of Christ. The Church found ways for its active role in the world to spread out, in freedom and fidelity, from the activity of the center to comprehend the entire membership.

I have given the Council centrality in this study, the middle four of its dozen chapters, as it brought the Church to an awareness of its potentiality for an active life of faith by its total membership. The present crisis of confidence arose subsequent to the Council. Those who distrust the Council and its teaching agree on its centrality to the present state of the Church and believe that it ruined everything in what had been a calm and ordered Church. Others of us see rather that a refusal of the central leadership to accept the basic prescriptions of the Council has left our people appalled. They had seen the promise of a restored Church and then found that it never happened, that instead the Church was led into a condition of more centralization and control than it had ever experienced before.

Many great decisions of the Council did take root and made great differences in its conduct. The injustices to Jews have been largely reversed. An ecumenical outlook toward other Christians has had its ups and downs but is regarded as the proper direction for the Church, and respect for those of different faiths has grown. Religious liberty and freedom of conscience, things that were effectively rejected by the preconiliar Church, have won recognition as of the essence of Christian life. Yet, we have seen the most essential findings of the Council, its endorsement of the role of all the bishops in collegial governance of the Church and its recognition that the Church, of its nature, is all its people, the People of God, basically negated, frustrated by a new rigid centralization, the college of bishops reduced, by careful steps, to the status of franchises, kept under tight control. Our people have disappeared from the Church out of disillusion. Christianity, instead of being the life of the people, has become something done by somebody else, and not very well.

The sex abuse scandal, coming on top of all that disappointment, proved explosive and gave an already estranged people the cynical feeling that the Church was some sort of fraud.

How will the Church revive? In its earliest days, the Church grew and attracted new members because, in the cold and often ruthless bureaucracy of the Roman Empire, it was a community of real loving care and fellowship for its members and of concern for the

poor and suffering that its people encountered. These were the very things that Jesus had preached and practiced. On those grounds, Christians multiplied to the point that the Empire could no longer defeat or do without them. This picture was never perfect, of course. They were a community of sinners, and knew they were, but this was the spirit. Conversions to Christianity came by personal choice to join in this attractive way of life.

At a later stage, as the Germanic tribes of Northern Europe were converted, the objective was to convert the kings, who would then command the baptism of all their people. This top-down way of spreading the influence of Christianity meant that its characteristic must become control. That has been much of the subsequent history of the Church, a distinct weakening of its essential Christian character, long tolerated by people, some of whom were devout believers in Christian faith, other simply conforming to the expectations of their society. Now that the people have gotten a whiff of what they see as hypocrisy, conformity can have no further place.

A new growth of Christianity can come now only by a return to the love and care of its original premises, to the things that are redolent of the life of Jesus. This will not be accomplished by control. When we speak nowadays of a "new evangelization," compulsion or scolding will have no effect. It can only be done by living a Christian life, giving an example. It is for this reason that we find such a burst of new energy and hope in our badly battered Church as the new Pope Francis appears to be so intent on restoring those essential aspects of Christian life, in his own person and in the model he gives in the spirit of St Francis.

This book had a bleaker look before the election of Pope Francis. During the conclave period, wise heads told us not to expect that any single man could bring about real restoration by himself, but a Pope is important. Pope John XXIII, by his own example of faith, brought about a true earthquake of conversion to Christian conviction in the Church. It may seem strange to speak of a need for conversion to Christianity in the Church, but that is the case.

Seeing the spread of disillusion and disappointment in the Church of recent years, I began arguing, in the atmosphere of the sex abuse scandal, that we would need another Council to meet our needs. It may well be that we can achieve them simply by implementing the decisions that were so central to the Council but have been so deliberately stifled: collegiality and the understanding of the Church as People of God.