

# *The Crisis Of Our Times*

These are the times that try mens' souls

—Thomas Paine

## **Preliminary Considerations**

Whenever I lecture or write about matters pertaining to the state of the Church, I believe it is worthwhile to begin by asking you to remember that just as Our Blessed Lord suffered in his body and human soul for our redemption, so must His Mystical Body, the Church, suffer until the end of time to complete, as St. Paul says, “that which is lacking in the suffering of the Lord..” Some of you will remember that I began my article, “Keeping the Faith in an Age of Anarchy,” which appeared in the Christmas, 1993 issue of *Christifidelis* with these same words. But almost two years have passed and *Christifidelis* has many new readers, so it may be worth repeating.

There was another essential, preliminary consideration in that article which we also ought to recall. God has entrusted His most precious gift to us, His Church, not to angels but to men, to us sinners; all of us, be we Pope, Bishop, Priest or layman. Therefore, we, with our sins and shortcomings act upon the Church as the executioners acted on the physical body of Our Lord. This applies to the shepherds as well as to the sheep. Notwithstanding all this, Our Lord has guaranteed that His Church will never completely fail; but she has suffered, is suffering and will suffer from those two evils, which beset every society governed by men; human malice and human error.

After some remarks about the “constitution” of the Church and crises and suffering in general, I will mention just four specific crises in the Church (out of many which could be examined) which flowed from these two evils and occurred between the fourth and eighteenth centuries. Finally, insofar as space permits, I shall address what I believe is the worst of all the internal crises with which the Church has ever been afflicted and one, which we are enduring at this very moment.

## **The Constitution of the Church**

The way the Church reacts to all internal crises, past and present has to do with the application of the law and exercise of authority, at least to some degree. Therefore, a brief glance at the fundamental points of the Church's “constitution” as given by her Founder will be valuable.

In the first place power in the Church is received from God, not from the people. Even during the first millennium when bishops, including the Bishop of Rome, were

elected by the clergy and people and confirmed in office by the neighbouring bishops, their power came from God, not those who elected them. The same is true, of course, of the Holy Father, who receives his power from God, not the members of the College of Cardinals who elected him.

Second, the power centres as instituted by Christ are two: the Pope at the centre, the bishops locally. Certain theologians maintain that other power centres (like metropolitan archbishops and local councils) who are, so to speak, between pope and bishops and could be regarded as belonging to the divine constitution of the Church because they go back to the immediate post-apostolic age and therefore could claim a generic apostolic institution. All other power centres are a product of history and human influences, not instituted by Christ, although, as we know, not all such influences are harmful and some have been beneficial. For example, there were human influences, which, from the start, have heavily conditioned the Church's legal thought, building a complex legal system round the God-given but sketchy core of the Church's constitution. It is obvious that, as the Church was born in the Mediterranean, its rudimentary legal system was influenced by Jewish law and by Roman law but, as far as the West is concerned, the Church's legal system remained nebulous until the twelfth century.

Third, in the divinely instituted power centres there are no division of powers: the pope and bishops are administrators, judges and lawgivers in their respective areas of competence.

Fourth, because of the Roman primacy the pope is by divine law the judge of the universal Church and final court of appeal for all cases.

### **Suffering and Crisis**

The sufferings of the mystical Body, which is racked not only by the shortcomings of men but by the intelligent (and sometimes nearly successful) attacks of the devil acting through sinners, can affect it from the outside through persecution and from the inside through heresies, schisms, mismanagement, oppression, injustice and extensive violations of the moral law. The internal crises of the Church generally, but not always, coincide with its prosperity. A rich, powerful and self-satisfied Church is always in danger. When the memories of purifying persecutions fade in the distance and when the shepherds become rich and powerful the attack of the devil is not far off. It may be in the form of another persecution or a tearing asunder of the Mystical Body from the inside.

Now, having made these preparatory observations, we can mention some of the bad periods of Church history in the last two thousand years. I am speaking, of course, of inside troubles or of periods of decadence, not of the persecutions, which often actually strengthen the Church although, at times, they have obliterated whole Christian communities, like the Churches of North Africa as a consequence of the Muslim invasion.

### **Four Crises**

The darkest hour of the Christian Church in the first thousand years was the so-called Arian crisis. Indeed, it is quite possible that this was the worst crisis in the entire history of the Church--until the one in our own time; so I shall have to say a bit more about it than I will the other three.

Between 318 and 319 A.D., a priest of Alexandria by the name of Arius started preaching a new doctrine, which stated that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God incarnate, that there was no such thing as the Blessed Trinity, that Jesus, if anything, was the incarnation of a super-angel but certainly not God. Of course all this struck at the very roots of Christianity. Arius quickly gathered followers round him so that the bishops started worrying; but when Arius' followers literally came to blows with the faithful Christians, the state stepped in to maintain peace and order. This took the form of an intervention by the Emperor Constantine, who had freed the Church from persecution and acted as its protector. Constantine, with the pope's consent, convened the first Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325 A.D. to settle the Arian controversy. Everything appeared to be decided when the Council declared Arius a heretic and wrote the first part of the Creed which we say every Sunday at Mass.

The Arians, however, did not simply give up and go away. They were a sophisticated, cunning and devious lot who, by a variety of underhanded tactics such as faked repentance, managed to replace many orthodox bishops with Arians and won over Constantine's successor, who started persecuting faithful Catholics. Eventually, they were able to beguile or intimidate the bishops of the West into excommunicating St. Athanasius, the heroic defender of the true faith and, for a time, it looked like Arianism had triumphed over the true faith.

The success of the Arians can be explained in part by the fact that the Church had become rich and powerful after the emperor Constantine became her protector and showered gifts upon her. Suddenly, it was fashionable to be a Christian and pagans began to convert in large numbers, but not all of them for the best of motives. Moreover, many of the bishops who had experienced the persecutions had died and

a goodly number of the new bishops were far more at home at the court of the Roman emperor than caring for the souls of the faithful.

Clever and underhanded as they were, the Arians forgot about the laity, who gathered around loyal priests, kept the true faith and assembled for Mass outside the cities because they would not participate in heretical rites in their own churches, which had been taken over. The derisive term, "country Christians", given them by the Arians became a badge of honour. The faithful laity and clergy kept the faith and, in 381, the Second Ecumenical Council was convened in Constantinople, the Creed completed and Arianism again condemned.

The second crisis took place in the tenth and eleventh centuries and was triggered by the influence of powerful Roman families, especially the House of Theophylact, who manipulated and controlled the papacy for their own benefit. Things were very bad from about 928 to 932. Later, in 956, the temporal ruler of Rome, whose name was Octavian, became pope as well and took the name John XII. His misrule and scandalous behaviour was so infamous that even the worldly and cynical Romans became fed up and called upon the German King Otto I to restore order in 962. Driven from the papal throne, John XII died in 964; murdered, it is said, by an outraged husband who found the ex-pope in amorous conversation with the man's wife.

Trouble broke out again in 1033 when the Count of Tusculum purchased the papal office for his son, who took the name Benedict IX. Some historical accounts say that Benedict was ten years old at the time he became pope and others give his age as thirteen. Whatever the case may be, when he reached manhood his rule became such a disgrace that the Roman people expelled him from the city. Benedict did manage a comeback and then proceeded to auction the papacy three times. Each time he would pocket the money and stage another comeback so, in 1046, there were three men claiming to be pope and the Holy Roman Emperor, Gregory VII, deposed all three in 1076.

As a general rule, the result of intervention by secular authorities in the internal affairs of the Church has not been good. Nonetheless, on the two occasions referred to here, the effects were beneficial. Over the two hundred years following the intervention of Gregory VII, we have a succession of popes, often good, sometimes tolerable and sometimes saintly.

Things take a turn for the worse again at the end of the thirteenth century which brings us to the third crisis. The papacy had become very powerful. It had made the

primacy of Rome effective over all the Western Church, it had started the great bureaucratic machine of the Roman Curia or central government of the Church, it had consolidated its temporal power over all central Italy and had presumed to assume the temporal leadership of the West. From now on one can say that if Rome was in good health the same went for the rest of the Church, if Rome was in a bad way the rest of the Church suffered. And suffering was indeed at hand. In 1294 there mounted the papal throne one of the most capable and intelligent men but also one of the greatest scoundrels of Church history: Boniface VIII. He had managed, by devious means in pressuring his predecessor, St. Celestine V, to resign and as soon as Boniface was installed on the papal throne he had his saintly predecessor imprisoned and probably murdered. Boniface was to a large extent immoral and probably not much of a believer. His rule was a disaster. Soon after the death of Boniface, who died in a fit of rage, the papal see was transferred to the French city of Avignon, where the popes came under the powerful influence of the French kings who treated the popes very much as if they were their chaplains. After the return to Rome from Avignon, in 1378 we have the great schism of the West with three popes excommunicating each other for a period of 35 years and dividing the Church amongst them. The Renaissance, with all its pagan values, extolled also at the papal court, witnessed a corrupt clergy, corruption spreading from the center to the periphery, with often near agnostic popes and prelates occupying the scene. Alexander Borgia is certainly not the worst pope of this age because, although a great sinner, he at least was a strong believer. Apart from the cultural pressure of pagan values in this age, the source of immorality and corruption is always the same: a worldly, rich and powerful Church enmeshed in temporal affairs not only in the rule of the papal states but also in the various states of Europe. It is worthy of note that we do not see a single saint amongst the popes from St. Celestine in the late thirteenth century to St. Pius V in the late sixteenth century.

Throughout the 14th, 15th and part of the 16th centuries the state of the papacy and of the clergy goes from bad to worse. It is also a period of numerous heresies (repressed by the Church), which culminate with the Reformation, which broke over Europe like a storm in the 16th century and destroyed the unity of Western Christendom.

The next crisis, which affected the Church, but not the papacy, occurred during the so-called period of the Enlightenment during the 18th century. One has again a worldly clergy (mostly prelates, the lower clergy and the religious orders were less affected) espousing the morals and ideas of an anti-Christian age, which turned human reason into a goddess, scoffing at anything supernatural. The French

revolution, a steadfast papacy and the attack of a godless world soon cured the Church of this malady and although from then onward not everything was satisfactory in the Church, there was no direct threat to the spiritual and moral life of the ordinary faithful. However, there were forces at work which appeared to be defeated in the early nineteenth century but appeared again in our own time—the post-Vatican II period, when all Hell was let loose and the faithful, including those in the United States and Canada, found their spiritual and moral lives in great danger. X

### **The Prelude to Modernism**

In the early years of the nineteenth century attempts were made by French intellectuals, particularly Felicite de Lammenais, Jean Baptiste Lacordaire and Charles de Montalembert, to “baptize” the revolutionary ideals of "liberty, equality and fraternity" by incorporating them in some way into Catholic teaching and practice. If the words “liberty” and “equality” had meant the same thing to Lammenais and his associates as they had meant to the soldiers of the Continental Army during the American revolution, perhaps it would not have been that bad; but in the French revolution “liberty” meant the license to rampage through the streets and murder everyone who disagreed with you and “equality” meant a complete overturning of the social order.

As I said earlier, “baptizing” non-Catholic human elements can sometimes benefit the Church, as it was when language of Greco-Roman philosophy was adopted to express Christian ideas. In the circumstance I am about to discuss, however, the results ultimately proved to be disastrous.

At first, the ideas of these French thinkers were known as “liberal Catholicism,” which had as its primary objectives the advocacy of separation of Church and state, freedom of conscience and popular sovereignty and was condemned by Pope Gregory XVI in the encyclical, in 1832. A few years later, Gregory XVI explicitly condemned the work of Lammenais in his encyclical, *Singulari Nos*. The fundamental difficulty with liberal Catholicism was its implicit acceptance of the principle that nothing could be accepted as certain which could not be verified by scientific analysis. Applied to theology, this would lead to the conclusion that human experience is the sole source of religious truth.

A concurrent development, which would have profound effects in our own time, was the analysis of scripture by scientific methods. Known as “higher criticism,” this approach was first seen among Protestant exegetes in the German universities, but it quickly attracted the interest of Catholic scholars, notably in France, where Ernest

Renan's controversial work, published in 1863, proposed that the divinity of Christ could not be assured by scripture.

Pope Pius IX, whose reign began in 1846, was a staunch opponent of liberal Catholicism. Even so, by the time of his death in 1878, the notion had assumed the essential elements of what we know as modernism, which reduced religion to a matter of individual and collective human experience, denied an objective revelation from God on which Christianity is ultimately based and excluded any reasonable grounds for the plausibility of Christianity based on miracles or the witness of history.

### **Modernism vs. the Church**

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, modernism had attracted among scholars sufficient numbers of supporters so that a kind of informal organization began to develop. The individual whose name has perhaps been most closely associated with the modernist movement was a French priest, Alfred Loisy, born in 1857 and a student of Ernest Renan. In 1892, Loisy launched a journal and, eleven years later, published a “modernist manifesto,” one purpose of which he admitted was “calculated to awaken opposition.”

Two other prominent figures in the modernist movement were the English Jesuit, George Tyrell, and his countryman, an aristocrat with the unlikely name—for an Englishman, anyway—of Baron Friedreich von Hugel. Tyrell was critical of the officially sanctioned neo-Thomistic theology (established as the basis for religious studies in 1879 by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical,) and came to accept and publicize Loisy's work. Von Hugel, who was essentially a philosopher, supported Tyrell and other modernist scholars. With his wealth and connections, von Hugel played a critical role in forming a network out of what had been the independent and uncoordinated work of individuals. The resulting spread of modernism meant that a clash with the Church was inevitable and, in 1903, a number of works by modernist authors, including five by Loisy, were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.

The year 1903 marked as well the beginning of the eleven year reign of St. Pius X, the first pope to be canonized since St. Pius V and only the second in the seven hundred years since St. Celestine V. Pius X is certainly remembered for the measures he took to suppress modernism, but the significant steps he took in catechetics, liturgy and canon law should not be forgotten.

The campaign against modernism intensified on July 3, 1907 when, the Holy Office issued a condemnation of sixty-five modernist errors. This was followed two months later on September 8 by, an encyclical of Pius X describing modernist

doctrines and concluding with strong, specific measures to be taken against individuals who supported them. For example, “Anyone who is in any way tainted with modernism is to be excluded without compunction from these offices, whether of government or teaching, and those who already occupy them are to be removed” (No. 48). Bishops also were reminded that it was their duty “to prevent writings of modernists, or whatever savours or promotes it, from being read when they have been published, and to hinder their publication when they have not” (No. 50). Vigilance committees were to be established in every diocese to advise the bishop of the existence of modernist errors and bishops were directed to send triennial reports to the Holy See.

In 1910, the anti-modernist oath was promulgated, which required all clerics to affirm five dogmatic truths and accept the condemnations of and upon receiving major orders and taking specific offices. The oath remained in force until Pope Paul VI unfortunately abrogated it in 1967.

Loisy was excommunicated in 1908, as was Tyrell, who died in 1909. Most of the other leading modernists were excommunicated, otherwise disciplined or had already left the Church. By the end of 1910, it looked as if the movement had been effectively suppressed. However, losers in theological controversies could no longer be exiled, imprisoned, or worse, as they has been in previous times. Loisy lived until 1940 and continued to publish after he left the Church, as did others, including von Hugel. Moreover, there were many non-Catholic modernists who could openly publish and promote their work free of any influence or control whatever by the Church, while a good deal of unpublished work by Catholics sympathetic to modernism was circulated surreptitiously in certain circles of Catholic intellectuals. All this burst forth after Vatican II and plunged the Church into what I believe is one of the worst crises of Church history, in a certain sense even worse than the Arian crisis.

When asked why I believe the crisis we now face is worse than Arianism, I give these reasons:

- (a) The principle vehicle of the faith, the liturgy, was untouched by the Arian crisis;
- (b) whereas the Arian crisis was precipitated and sustained by the intervention of the secular power, the post-Vatican II crisis comes from within the Church and is therefore more difficult to fight;
- (c) in the fourth century, Pope Liberius finally signed the excommunication of St. Athanasius under duress—in the twentieth century Pope Paul VI was admittedly taken in and hoodwinked by his misguided optimism, but there was no duress;



**(d)** the present crisis is not only one of faith but of morals as well. In addition, today not only one dogma, albeit a very important one, is denied as with Arianism, but all dogmas, be it even the existence of a personal God!

### **A Time of Crisis**

The Church in North America has had a great but also an easy history until today. No real persecution has oppressed you, at least since the First Amendment became law. There has been sometimes some discrimination but never as bad as what the Italian Catholics had to suffer at the end of the last century. Now your time has come to suffer for Christ and the worst trial of all is to suffer at the hands of one's own fellow Christians, especially if they hold office in the Church. I think the cases of St. John of the Cross and Padre Pio illustrate my point.

There is also a parallel in the history of the United States. During the darkest days of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine (whose views on religion I certainly do not endorse) electrified the nation with the stirring words quoted above. As you know better than I, he went on to say that it was no time for the “summer soldier” or “sunshine patriot.” In the same way, now is not the time for summer soldiers of Christ or sunshine Catholics.

### **A Time for Faith**

This brings us now to the question of how to keep our own faith and combat the forces of darkness in the present age when, as Pope Paul VI said, “The smoke of Satan has penetrated the Church.” Among the many possible courses of action, in closing I will mention just a few.

The first thing we must do, of course is to keep ourselves as spiritually strong as we can by prayer, sacrifice and recourse to the sacraments. These are all important because Satan, the original summit of creation, is more powerful than any of us and because Our Lord says, “Without me, you can do nothing.”

Second, we must forthrightly and continually testify to the truth, while always remembering that the cardinal virtues are four. In the exercise of justice and fortitude we must not forget prudence and temperance. If public testimony is not your individual strength, pray for and support the publications and organizations, which are engaged in this essential apostolate.

Third, a lesson can be taken from the “country Christians” who, as I mentioned earlier, gathered with their priests outside the towns to celebrate Mass, where the Arians could not get at them. If the general idea is right, though, the situation today

is different. The enemy does not appear today as clearly as he did in those days, is often difficult to grasp and not all that may seem wrong is, in itself, wrong. It is therefore necessary, when forming groups of Catholics who are of the same correct persuasion, to avoid open confrontations with legitimate authority and to avoid turning such groups into sects.

Fourth, when sufficient cause exists, use the legal machinery of the Church to vindicate your fundamental right to know the truth and to worship in a proper way, but always without bitterness or undue insistence and never to promote marginal issues.

Finally, there may be times when we can turn to Caesar when there are issues which come under the purview of secular authorities, such as those concerning property or rights of employees. Rather than wearing the crown of the Holy Roman Emperor, Caesar may wear the black robe of an American judge. I say this with all due regard for the risks involved and knowing that, once Caesar enters, we have to know when to show him the door.

May I end by saying that many years of suffering may be ahead for all of us, although the tide is slowly turning in the Universal Church. It is not turning at the same pace everywhere and in some countries, including the United States and Canada, the situation could get even worse before it gets better. Whatever the case, you have in your hands the great new and the great theological encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. We can truly strengthen our faith and oppose the enemy and his minions if we assimilate these superb documents, which are like lighthouses in a dark and stormy sea.

Whether this happens in our lifetimes or not I cannot say. But I am sure that the clouds will start rolling away soon and the present crisis will go the same way as the others—into oblivion.

—Count Neri Capponi