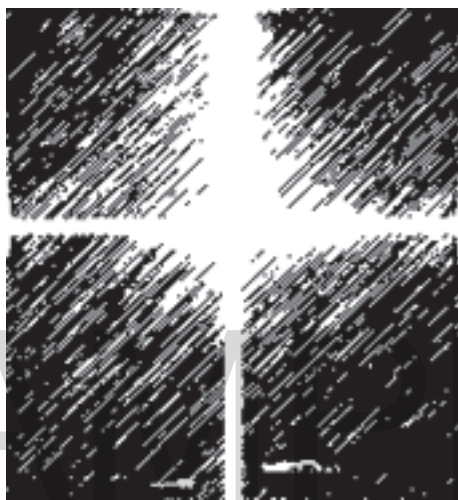


This Time of the Church

Frank O'Loughlin



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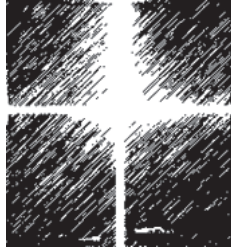
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INTRODUCTION



Our experience of living in the Church today is very different from that of those who lived in the Church thirty, forty or fifty years ago.

At a purely demographic level we cannot but note that the number of people at Mass on Sundays is much diminished and that the number of both priests and the religious is declining sharply.

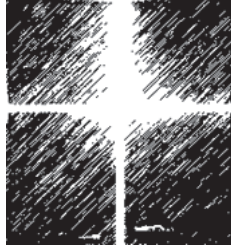
There have been many changes in the life of the Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Most people have responded positively to these changes, some have not. Some of those unhappy with Vatican II are unhappy because of the changes that were introduced following it for the Church's present 'diminished' state.

Then there have been recent scandals in the Church, especially that of sexual abuse, and the official response to it; these have occupied the minds of everyone in the Church and have caused much disillusionment.

Many Catholics are also troubled by some of the official positions and attitudes of the Church which they find questionable or even unhealthy. They are particularly disturbed by the refusal even to discuss some of these issues which they feel are in urgent need of serious discussion. There is a good deal of alienation among Catholics over such matters.

There are real and deeply felt problems in all of the above but I do not think that any of them reach to the deepest issue that faces us all in the Church today. There is something else afoot which is not within our control, which is not primarily a matter of the inner life of the Church. There are things other than pastoral inadequacy or pastoral failure for which we need to find an appropriate response. For instance, it seems that the decline in numbers is virtually the same in parishes where there is a lot of vitality and in those in which there is very little happening to engage people. It seems that there is not a great difference in terms of handing on the faith from one generation to the next between families of keen faith and those where the faith is not so prominent. What I want to suggest is that we are dealing with wide-ranging changes that result from deep changes which have occurred in Western societies. By Western societies I mean societies taking their origin from Western Europe. This change has altered the nature of the relationship between Christianity and those societies. This change I am describing as one from Christendom to pluralism has to do with a long-term and far-reaching change in the history of Western societies into which the Church is being swept up. We are dealing with a changing situation which goes beyond the Church while affecting it radically. We are dealing with a social, cultural and political changes that have significant religious repercussions.

CHAPTER ONE



Change: From Christendom to Pluralism

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We live in an age in which change has happened and is happening at a fast rate. This is not just social, economic and technological change but change in the way people live and think and in the social structures within which they live their lives. There is a new 'mind' or mentality or way of seeing things being formed.

This new mentality questions many of the things we have received from the past, things which earlier generations held to be certain or even obvious. Perhaps even more significantly, this new mentality does not just question such things, but often cannot see the point of them – at times just tolerantly ignoring them. This situation in which things of great significance to an earlier generation are now not seen as having much significance at all is a real sign that we are dealing with a significant change in mentality and culture. It can almost seem, at times, that we are not dealing with two generations of the same culture but with two different cultures newly encountering each other. Virtually everyone in our time is feeling these changes not just externally but within their own families and within their own minds and hearts. Sexual mores are an obvious example of this. A couple of generations ago people living together before marriage was seen by most as a scandal and something to be hidden. Now in the minds of most people approaching marriage, it is more or less seen as the normal approach to marriage.

Even those who become strident in their opposition to this changed situation show the influence of these changes on them in their very stridency.

Such changes are also occurring within the body of the Church. They are arousing different reactions and points of view, and are bringing about a variety of different attitudes within the body of the Church. They are creating confusion for some; they are being welcomed as signs of renewal by others. Within the Church we find people who have very different views on many

issues and many find the views of those who differ from them quite incomprehensible. Many people have, of course, decided to get on with their lives without reference to the Church.

Without a capacity to listen, to be tolerant and honest, this situation has the capacity to threaten the Church's unity. In an age of such mentality change resolving these problems is no simple matter; but the new mentality is integral to this stage of the Church's history. It is this time of the Church that I am concerned with in this book.

Interpreting change

Change has to be interpreted. It is difficult to see clearly what is happening in a situation in which we are deeply involved; our involvement and deep feelings can mislead us. Unless we are able to find a way of stepping back from and looking at this change, we are likely to misread it. The present situation of the Church makes some people feel that all is lost and that we are on a curve of decline that cannot be halted. Such an attitude indicates that we are allowing our own fears and anxieties to interpret the change. Similarly, in experiencing such change, people may have it in their minds that the Church has to be always just as they have known it in the past in order for it to be truly the Church. So we may need to look at this period of change in the light of other times of change to help us to interpret it.

As a major thrust of this book, I suggest that we need to see this present time of change as part of a much longer historical shift of which our age is a significant part. The historical shift that I am suggesting is indicated by the title of this chapter – 'From Christendom to Pluralism'. Looking at our time as part of that historical shift helps us to see not just that the change we are experiencing has continuity with the past, but also that it is part of a broad historical and cultural movement affecting all Western cultures, and it also helps us to see that there is a direction to this shift.

What we are dealing with is a transition; and to use the word 'transition' is already to begin to interpret this change. This transition will not swallow up Christianity or the Church but is creating a new situation by requiring and bringing about a new relationship between society and Christianity compared with the relationship between the two in the past. This new relationship will be different from the former relationship in which Christianity was intrinsic to Western cultures and was formally established as such.

Let us now begin to look at our age in the context of this shift going on in all cultures derived from Western Europe. All such cultures have had – as part of their identity – a relationship to the Christian gospel and the Church. It is precisely that relationship which is changing.

It may be useful at this point to say briefly what is meant by both 'Christendom' and 'pluralism' or 'pluralist societies'. We will say more about both as we proceed. By 'Christendom' we mean that social, cultural and political arrangement by which European society and Christianity were virtually merged into each other – to be one was to be the other. This was particularly true of the Middle Ages. Christianity was the established religion of those societies.

By 'pluralist' we mean a social, cultural, political arrangement by which in principle no particular religious tradition or worldview is established as an intrinsic part of the society. Because there is a plurality of such views in the society, it is left to the individual to choose whichever they wish. It is this latter type of society that we belong to in Western democracies.

The end of an age

In the transition in which we are involved, we are seeing a long period of Christian history come to an end and a new period of Christian history beginning. I would like to stress that we are dealing with both an end and a beginning.