

From A Moralizing to a Liberating Message of the Catholic Church

According to the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, Christianity has abolished itself through its process of propagation. It is naturally the opinion of Protestantism that institutionalism kills the message.

Transforming the Gospel message into a civilization condemns it to a certain decadence. Civilization necessarily stiffens the message, constricts it and finally perverts it. To a great extent we saw this happening all through the history of the two thousand year old Catholic Church. Today we are witnessing another distortion of Christianity in the Catholic Church. The Gospel message, which is supposed to be the good and joyful 'God-spell', the *euangelion*, has been turned into a moralistic message through the power of clericalism.

Moralism is a stubborn church disease. It has an important direct disadvantage. When leaders tell us precisely what we must do, we no longer must follow our conscience; all we have to do is to obey. We no longer need to follow our own conscience. But the formation of our conscience as a guiding principle in our life is an essential Christian virtue. He who only obeys, follows the law, including unjust laws. Thus moralism of the church leaders is a danger to a balanced morality.

Luckily for the church new chances were given, paradoxically by the collapse of her moral authority. Before the encyclical "Humanae Vitae" of 1968 people thought that the church on matters of sexual morality spoke wise words.

After *Humanae Vitae*, people thought what the Pope said was nonsense. The hesitating intellectual Pope Paulus VI forbade all birth control except the natural one. The encyclical was totally ignored by most Catholics. The Pope has no experience with sexuality so he must keep his silence. And if he has experience, then he certainly must keep quiet.

The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was the turning point. By taking a position against birth control which the majority of Catholics practiced, the Church lost all credibility on the broad terrain of marriage and family. It is tragic that this happened under the pontificate of the cautious Pope Paul VI. Ten years later Pope Johannes Paulus II took the seat of Petrus. He was sterner and more direct.

But the millions who applauded him on the airfields and the soccer fields, did not follow the rules which he sternly imposed. About his admirers was sometimes said: "They like the singer, but not the song". The "JP II, we love you" which one heard during mass manifestations, was more about him, than about his message. The moral authority of the church, also during the pontificate of the Polish Pope, has greatly evaporated.

This became beautifully clear in the discussion about giving Communion to divorced couples who remarried civilly. Communion had to be refused to those civilly remarried couples.



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According to canon 915 of the canonic law book: ‘People who live in great sin are not allowed to receive Communion. In the ‘declaration’ of the Papal Council of April 29, 2000, the scandal is not the refusal of Communion but the breaking of the unbreakable marriage bond. The scandal is no longer linked to the feeling of the believers. It is the transgression of the official church doctrine concerning marriage morals. *Humanae Vitae* of 1968 gave the credibility of the church in matters of sexual morality a hard hit. The declaration of 2000 is almost an official recognition that it is scandalous that people no longer find scandalous what they should find scandalous. It is a tragical confirmation of the increasing powerlessness of the institute.

In the post synod apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of April 8, 2016 Pope Franciscus stated that civilly remarried divorcees who live as man and woman do not necessarily live in mortal sin and in that case may receive Communion. Four Cardinals asked the Pope to explain. They argued that the Pope also must keep the doctrine of the church, A lot more bishops think the same way but they do not want to confront the present Pope. They are ‘sunflower bishops’. Just as the sunflower turns towards the sun, so also they turn to the Pope who is now in power. It is not very courageous but that is not the strongest virtue of church leaders.

The church is no longer capable of being the moral leader. It is not only because of ‘*Humanae Vitae*’ that they lost credibility but at least as much because of the sexual scandal of the clergy. It is tragic that it had to happen this way, whereby many victims are found and whose wound cannot be healed. But the moral bankruptcy of the church gives also the chance to take a whole new different approach. First we need a milder morality which is more evangelical and less churchly. Then a radical turn is necessary: the church does not have to tell others how to live, she must herself live for others.

The time of the powerful church with her unyielding morals has come to an end. This offers a chance to hold a more evangelical morality which understands the limitations of human beings.

Also for the church new possibilities arise whereby they no longer want to control and dominate people against their personal conscience formation, but instead want to help in people’s daily life. Pope Francis in an interview with Antonio Spodaro in 2013 compares the church to a field hospital. She must heal the wounds and warm the hearts of people. First heal the wounds like the merciful Samaritan and only then do more or less. The church as hospital must stop its moralizing and offer prevention of anxiety, hate, populism and nationalism. And also leave the illusion of total virtuousness and perfection, just like Icarus who wanted to fly higher and higher until the sun scorched his wings.

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To do these things a theory of justice in the style of John Rawls is not sufficient. Justice presupposes two fundamental convictions which are both questionable. The first supposition is that justice exists. But it does not exist. Is it just that a seven year old child dies of cancer? The second supposition is that if we are careful we can organize a just world. But we cannot organize ultimate justice because structurally we cannot eliminate all differences between people: the stronger ones get and the weaker ones receive.

The church brings mercifulness, forgiveness and generosity which the profane society with its social contract cannot give. The strong moral rules of earlier days no longer hold. Jesus does not demand the impossible. Opposed to the absolute morality stands what Emmanuel Levinas calls “small acts of goodness”. One does not have to be a saint to be a Christian.