

## CONSTANTINIANISM:

### HOW WE ARE AFFECTED BY WHAT HAPPENED IN THE 4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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*The change which affected the priesthood at that time (ie in the 5<sup>th</sup> century) was itself a consequence of an even deeper change: one which affected ecclesiology as a whole. Mentalities passed from a conception of the 'Church, community of Christians' to one which accepted the 'distance between the lay people and the Church of the clerics'. In the first state there was 'an organic union between pastors and faithful' in matters touching liturgical celebrations, councils and other activities of church life. In the second state the idea that predominates is that 'the whole Christian life and the religious state depend upon the priests, their fidelity, the purity of their life, and their learning'. The 'different stages of the progressive distancing which took place between the priest and the faithful' seem to have arisen from a definition of the Church as 'consisting mainly of priests'.*

[Jean Leclercq, "The Priesthood in the Patristic and Medieval Church," *The Christian Priesthood*, edited by Nicholas Lash and Joseph Rhymer, Dimension Books, 1970, 73.]

Some of us in the Catholic Church in Australia in the 1990s began to ask whether there might be something about the Catholic "system" – for want of a better word – that had/has a relevance to the alarming number of incidents of sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy and religious. Is there something in the way we Catholics regard and exercise authority or think about sex or structure the institution or train men and women in houses of formation that has allowed or even enabled the sexual abuse to occur and that has not allowed us to deal well with the horrible truth of it?

That systemic line of thinking did not gain significant momentum at the time. Now, with the publication of the Ryan and Murphy Reports in Ireland (2009) and the Royal Commission set up by the Federal Government in Australia (2013), we are being prompted to raise the systemic questions with some urgency.

The Murphy Report noted that the leaders of the Irish Church chose

.... the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the Church, and the preservation of its assets. All other considerations, including the welfare of children and the justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities. (1.15)

In an article entitled "Culture that Corrodes" (*The Tablet*, December 5, 2009, 6-7), Fr Donald Cozzens notes that the Murphy Report

details a pattern of church response to clergy sexual abuse that mirrors that of countless other archdioceses and dioceses throughout the Catholic world.

We can no longer postpone the rigorous scrutiny of the Catholic Church system.

In this reflection I will look briefly at the historical implications of the Edict of Milan (313 CE) and the years that followed and were shaped by that Edict. It would be hard to overestimate the impact of this historical moment in the later development of the culture and governance of Catholicism:

The Edict of Milan, issued by the Emperor Constantine the Great in 313, brought an end to the persecution that had menaced the Church during the first three centuries of its existence and

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection is one part of Fr Michael's submission to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – 6 February 2017. The issues raised here remain a crucial challenge for us all – especially as we approach the Plenary Council.

opened the way for it to become the official religion of the empire ..... (John-Peter Pham, *Heirs of the Fisherman: Behind the Scenes of Papal Death and Succession*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 47-48.)

As the epigraph to this reflection states, there was a lot more to this than “an end to the persecution of the Church”. As Pham notes in the same place, “it came at a price”. In outlining the “price”, I will rely heavily on an essay written by the eminent medievalist, Fr Jean Leclercq, entitled “The Priesthood in the Patristic and Medieval Church” – see *The Christian Priesthood*, edited by Nicholas Lash and Joseph Rhymer, Dimension Books, 1970, 53-76. Leclercq presented this paper in a symposium held at the Benedictine Abbey of Notre-Dame-du-Bec in Normandy in 1969.



Christians were subject to the death penalty from the time of Emperor Nero. From being persecuted up until the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity became the State religion in 380 (CE) and had well and truly settled into a new way of being Church by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

Jean Leclercq, writes:

We can say in general that the 5<sup>th</sup> century is the transition period and that the passage of the Church from the patristic to the medieval age was completed before the opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. .... Although certain changes took place during the middle ages, none had the importance of those which occurred in the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> century; these were decisive steps which the Church took as she evolved from the patristic to the medieval age. (Jean Leclercq, *op cit*, 54.)

Leclercq gives us a brief description of the situation towards the ending of the patristic period – the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century:

Two characteristic facts of this period stand out as being particularly relevant for the question in hand:

1. facilities for culture became equally accessible to laymen and to clerics;
2. both categories of the faithful enjoyed direct participation in the life of the Church.

History shows that *laymen* took an active part in all of the internal workings of the Church. They had an important role to play in the liturgy, which was still, at that time, a ‘popular’ liturgy, that is, a liturgy for the people. They had their word to say in the election of bishops, and the nomination of priests. They contributed to the drawing up of church laws and customs; prepared some of the matter for discussion at the councils, and even took part in them. They administered church properties, and it was an accepted thing that they should be allowed to preach (*docere*), the records show that they often did so. In brief we may say that laymen were recognised as being full-time Christians and were given full shares in church affairs. There was no monopoly on the part of the *clerics*: they lived among the laymen, had the same way of life and manner of dress; they were urged to practise chastity, either within the married state or as celibates; they officiated at the altar and administered the sacrament of baptism. (*Op cit*, 55.)

With the Edict of Milan, Emperor Constantine “transferred the privileges of heathen priests to Christian bishops and priests” (*Op cit*, 57.) though this was slow to take effect:

In the west, it was only after the barbarian invasions, when all the administrative framework had disintegrated, that the functions held by government officials passed into the hands of the Christian bishops. It is this delay which explains that Christian priests took over profane affairs in the Roman society and not what was sacred or religious. .... it had a profound influence upon

(the Church's) internal structure and forms of life. These transformations came about gradually ... (ibid.)

The "profound influence" and the changes wrought are outlined by Leclercq:

We can say that there were two major elements underlying the changes in the way of life of churchmen:

1. Laymen no longer enjoyed the same facilities for acquiring culture as did the clerics.
2. The political and social structures which had been in force were replaced by episcopal authority.

This meant that new structures were progressively built up: there was constant strife between the laity – in the person of the princes – and the clerics; the laity strove to gain more and more control over them. But at the beginning of the middle ages it was the clergy – that is to say, mainly the bishops who were sometimes more numerous than the priests – which was invested with secular functions. Any priests that there were served merely as the immediate auxiliaries of the bishops. A further step in this evolution occurred when the bishops relegated most of their ministerial functions – preaching, administration of baptisms, presiding over the eucharistic celebrations – to their priests while they busied themselves with governing, administration and control. It was during the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries also that more and more priests began to reside in rural areas. These different factors are sufficient to explain the widening of the gap that took place between the laity and the clerics. Not only were laymen looked down upon as irresponsible children whose duty it was to venerate and obey the priests, but they even came to accept this state of affairs as normal. This change of mentality was expressed, even symbolised, in certain material changes: for example, the altar was pushed back to the end of the apse which signified that the liturgy had become more and more of a ceremony, a strictly clerical affair in which laymen had nothing to say. As O Nussbaum puts it, 'No one took any notice of the congregation'. During the 6<sup>th</sup> century there crept in the custom of saying masses without a congregation: the 'private' mass, as it was called, the *missa sine populo*, a mass-for-the-priest, or priests, was just one more reason for ignoring those who were not there – the lay people.

The clergy formed a special category of Christians, an order set apart and distinguished by its juridical privileges, its culture – varying in degree according to the individual cases, but on the whole more developed than that of the laity – the way of life implying celibacy, and the work which they were allowed to do: members of the clergy earned their living either 'from the altar' – offerings, tithes, etc. – or from a benefice, in particular from the revenue on lands owned by the church to which they were attached. Those priests who were not able to live on these sources of income were allowed to work, in agriculture or a craft (*artificioium*), but were never allowed to trade.

All this resulted in what G Le Bras has called 'the exaltation of the clergy', a phenomenon which has two main aspects; the progressive *clericalisation of the church*, which was manifested by a growing tendency to place all church affairs into the hands of the clergy; and, secondly, a concomitant modification of the life of the clerics; if we may make use of a recent French neologism, we could call this second process the '*clergification*' of the clerics. It had several consequences of which the first was that the clerical state of life became a reality of the sociological order, whereas at the beginning it was purely ecclesial and sacramental: from the merely ecclesiastical status which it had always been, it now became an officially recognised secular status. Henceforth clerics took up social functions, they became public officers such as registrars. Bishops were given higher rank than priests, but all were public men of social

standing. Bishops were given the title of *'illustrii'* and ranked with the senators. This obliged them to keep up a certain standard of living in harmony with their social status and this to such an extent that 'bishops were practically obliged to live in luxury in order to please the higher classes of society'. In short, clerics became 'clergie' in old French, and 'clergy' in English. The cleric became a clergyman, a member of one of the higher classes of society. He had originally been 'set apart' in view of his sacred functions, and he ended up by being 'separated' because of his profane functions. A second consequence of the process of 'clergification' was that the clergymen were unequal to their tasks: very few had received adequate preparation for assuming the dignity and privileges inherent to their newly acquired social status: they were, in general, lacking in the necessary personality and prestige. (Op cit, 58-60.)



The question to address here is not, "Why did this happen in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries?". When Constantine offered Christians their freedom as equal members of the Empire, it is not difficult to imagine their relief. They would have been very keen to make the best of their opportunities. No, the questions we need to ask concern *our* times: "What is the effect of those developments of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries on the Catholic Church today? In particular, are there any effects that remain and serve us poorly today?"

When the Second Vatican Council opened on 11 October 1962, Yves Congar OP, who was present, wrote a very personal reflection in his journal:

My God, who have brought me here by ways that I did not choose, I offer myself to you to be, if you will, the instrument of your Gospel in this event in the life of the Church, which I love, but would like to be less 'Renaissance'! less Constantinian . . ." (Yves Congar OP, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne OP and Mary Cecily Boulding OP, Liturgical Press, 2012, 86.)

Fr Congar, a little later in the same journal entry writes of the opening ceremony and its historical context:

... I see the weight, that has never been renounced, of the period when the Church behaved as a feudal lord, when it had temporal power, when popes and bishops were lord who had a court, gave patronage to artists and sought a pomp equal to that of the Caesars. **That, the Church never repudiated in Rome. To emerge from the Constantinian era has never been part of its programme.** (Emphasis added.) Poor Pius IX, who understood nothing about the movement of history, who buried French Catholicism in a sterile attitude of opposition, of conservatism, of Restorationist sentiment . . . was called by God to listen to the lesson of events, those masters which he gives us with his own hands, and to free the Church from the wretched logic of the "Donation of Constantine", and convert it to an evangelical attitude which would have enabled it to be less OF the world and more FOR the world. He did exactly the opposite. A catastrophic man who did not know what the ECCLESIA was, nor yet what Tradition was; he oriented the Church to be always OF the world and not yet FOR the world which nevertheless stood in need of it. (Emphasis in the original.)

And Pius IX still reigns. Boniface VIII still reigns; he has been superimposed on Simon Peter, the humble fisher of men! (Yves Congar OP, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne OP and Mary Cecily Boulding OP, Liturgical Press, 2012, 88.)

The legacy of Emperor Constantine became mingled with other influences down the ages. It also, sadly, became identified with “Tradition” providing a rationale to “never repudiate” it. As Fr Yves Congar noted, the legacy of Constantine is still very much with us.

Serious consideration of the following questions would undoubtedly take us back to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries for at least some of the answers:

1. Why has the Church repeatedly persecuted and oppressed Jews, tortured and executed “heretics” and why did it fight the brutal wars we know as “The Crusades”?
2. Why is there not more transparency and accountability in Church governance?
3. Why does the Church resist facing errors and corruption and its own wrongdoing when it professes to live by the teaching of Jesus that “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32)?
4. Why is there not more involvement of women at all levels of Church life?
5. Why is the mystical heart of the faith not more to the fore when the very essence of what the Church proclaims is found in the words of St Paul, “I live now, not I but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:19)?
6. Why has there been such a suspicion of the Sacred Scriptures and resistance to promoting the reading and studying of those Scriptures?
7. Why is the Church so slow to engage in dialogue and seek to learn from others?
8. Why has the Church not been at the forefront of the promotion of human rights?
9. Why is the Church so often aligned with the forces of political, cultural and economic conservatism?
10. Why has the Church repeatedly aligned itself with oppressive regimes?
11. Why have doctrine and law so dominated the person and relationships in Church governance, teaching, culture and pastoral manner?
12. Why did we not have more concern for the victims of sexual abuse?
13. Why did we cover up those crimes?

