
The Church In Crisis

VATICAN II

THE EPILOGUE?

The modern Catholic Church is facing a crisis of proportions hitherto never imagined. How will the Church be restored to her former glory? The ultimate cause of the crisis is the loss of the supernatural virtue of faith and so the resolution to the crisis naturally lies in its restoration—the hierarchy of the Church needs to return to the teachings of its perennial magisterium, they must understand them in the light of sound metaphysics and, above all, they must embrace them with a faith that is informed by supernatural charity. Some think that only a chastisement on a biblical scale will bring this about, others foresee the collapse of the exterior organisation of the Church as being the occasion of a new beginning, while others again predict a gradual conversion of the hierarchy over several generations. The article below was written by a diocesan priest who is trying his best to live his priesthood. The story he tells is heart-rending and, because it is by no means singular, may contain the key to what happens next. The priest's name has been changed to preserve his anonymity.

Fr. Stanley is a traditional Catholic priest, a parish priest in fact, who happens to be responsible for the largest parish in his diocese.

Fr. Stanley has been ordained a number of years now, but the material effect of his labours are difficult to discern because all the parishes in which he has worked have now been amalgamated into larger parishes. The amalgamations were necessary because there have been only two ordinations to the priesthood in the diocese over the last four years—set against nine sudden deaths and eighteen retirements over the same period of time.

At this moment of time, however, such matters (Fr. Stanley has been told) should not worry him because his bishop has put in place “sound structures” throughout the diocese to “face the future with confidence and to look forward to an era of *faith-growth* where the laity will come into their own.” “The days of ‘Father knows best,’ are long gone and the Church will be better for it.” But deep down, Fr. Stanley suspects otherwise.

When he first arrived at his present parish, Fr. Stanley saw that there was



much work to be done. As you might expect, there is always resistance to change, but in spite of this, he managed to make reasonable progress. He redecorated and restored the church on more traditional lines. There were a few objections about the replacement of the stations of the cross, but, apart from a few phone calls from worried parishioners about the swap, matters soon settled down, and it now seems that everyone likes the traditional ones again.

Fr. Stanley also reinstated a statue of the parish patron saint in the church together with devotional candles for the faithful. He had found it one day with great pleasure in a locked cupboard; it was last seen about 30 years ago. The same was true for the monstrance—there had been no benediction for 30 years. He

also introduced Marian devotions and a tridentine Mass on Thursday evenings at which 20-30 faithful assist.

The years passed and he learned many lessons along the way. In his previous parish, for example, when he arrived he was disturbed to find a very strange pastoral arrangement with the local protestant Anglican Church. The vicar and his flock were using the Catholic church for their services and some confusion had set in with the Catholic parishioners in relation to matters of faith. For instance, the vicar had been allowed to use the Catholic tabernacle for his “sacrament.” There was also a shared Easter Triduum. Sometimes the vicar would baptise Catholic children as some Catholics found him more friendly than their own parish priest. While the vicar took time off, the Catholic parish priest would even take the Anglican communion service. The poor Anglican vicar imagined that the arrangement would continue as before, but was cruelly disappointed—it took Fr. Stanley two weeks to separate the different religions.

Although victories had been won for the faith, Fr. Stanley still has many wor-

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ries. One constant worry is that only 2-3% of parents whose children he has baptised make any effort to come to Mass (even irregularly). Quite frequently the initial approach by parents for baptism is made to the headteacher of the school and, when the parents finally make contact with the parish priest (by telephone), they require directions to the parish church. Many do not bother in the end.

It is no surprise, therefore, that while the school is full and thriving, the average age of mass attenders is about 68 years of age.

Fr. Stanley's superiors have told him not to worry; his diocese now has numerous departments, committees and workgroups to deal with all issues relating to "ministry" and our priest has been told that these bodies exist to further the mission of the Church; and the bishop says, "this will be the true Church Militant on earth."

Fr. Stanley, on the contrary, sees an ever increasing wilderness and fears for the future. Privately, many clergy agree with him. His neighbouring parish presents a good example of this where, without consulting the parish priest, the diocese decided to close the parish—the decision having been made by a committee. When it did close, a picture appeared in the local press of a broken baptismal font alongside two rubbish bins. "Is this what the future holds?" he asked himself.

Fr. Stanley recently attended one of the monthly deanery conferences (a meeting of priests of the local deanery). There were fifteen priests in attendance, but they were a curious mix. He was wearing a cassock and collar, the rest were dressed in a variety of clerical attire, one attended

in t-shirt and jeans (which are his clericals).

Desiring to understand his colleagues, at times during the meeting Fr. Stanley asked for clarification on the meaning of phrases such 'a communion of communions', or 'having to start enacting change rather than limiting ourselves to a narrow parochial vision.' He also wondered why so much money is lifted from his parish account to meet diocesan administration costs.

No one in the meeting seemed to have



the answers to his questions and then he was asked not to interrupt because it was near lunchtime. What seems to have escaped his fellow priests in their deliberations about the future, thought Fr. Stanley, was that in twelve months, six of the fifteen priests at the meeting will have retired.

On returning to his presbytery after the meeting, Fr. Stanley's equanimity was further shaken by some fairly common problems: the headteacher had left a message about some children who could not attend the next instruction of the sacramental programme because they have either gone on holiday (during school time), or they had to be with their separated mother or father.

The bank had also been on the phone about the current account being over-

drawn—would he mind calling them. He has several outstanding bills to pay. He also has to contact the police about recent vandalism to church property. And then he must take issue with a family over the choice of music at a forthcoming funeral. One of the songs was "Life is a cabaret old son."

Fr. Stanley feels like most of his priesthood has been a cabaret, just there to keep the show on the road, pay the bills and make everyone laugh, but deep down he really does know what has happened. He and his priesthood have been emasculated; he has—on all fronts—been superseded by councils, commissions and experts who seem to have lost the faith. His bishop cannot lend a helping hand—it was he who created these structures in the first place.

It is now late afternoon, and Fr. Stanley is in his study. He glances down at his diary which is crammed with meeting after meeting—mostly concerning the school over which he has an ever diminishing influence. In the back of his mind are the three impending funerals for which arrangements need to be made. Somewhere down below, he can hear Susan, the parish helper, chastising her husband over a mishap at the parish centre.

Fr. Stanley stares out from his study at the distant scene. It is mid-February—the depth of winter—and a cold wind blows from the west. Dark rain clouds approach rapidly and ice-cold rain begins to spatter the window. "Is this the winter of our discontent?" he asked himself. For a moment all is quiet, then the telephone begins to ring again. He wonders for a moment who it might be this time ...and then lets it ring. Ω