

Limes - Heartland

Will The New World Order Be Catholic? (1)

by Manlio Graziano

Like secular big powers, the Vatican aims at countering its decline in a rapidly changing world. The task is not easy. But the Church's strategies look at the (very) long term.

1. Twenty years after 1989, the current crisis has finally made it apparent to all that the old international order must, sooner or later, give way to a new one. Thus, common sense joins the many scholars who have, over the course of the last years, and in some cases even earlier, analyzed the decline of the American economy and its possible and predictable consequences.

Nevertheless, the great powers that have sought to base themselves on this body of scholarship, in order to reconfigure their long-term policies, can be counted on the fingers of one hand. It is precisely those powers that have, traditionally, cast their policies in the form of a “manifest destiny” to which they have been called, where the sense of a universal mission and hegemonic ambitions march hand in hand: the United States, China, France and the Vatican.

The US, where studies upon the outcome of Yalta have probed deeper, has been yet trapped by the necessity of preserving, at any cost, their declining hegemony. France had already decided half a century ago to make up for its strategic weakness, relying on the project of the “third force”; however, the return of Germany after 1989 reduced its dreams of grandeur to a prosaic cohabitation, and constrained Paris to befuddled and faltering progress. China, for its part, has long-term strategies, but its calculations are largely undisclosed; and the more its possible hegemony is discussed, the more discreet it becomes.

Besides the sense of a universal mission, and of course, the conviction of incarnating a “manifest destiny”, the Vatican shares other characteristics with the aforementioned great powers. Like the US, it has an overarching influence over several continents. Like France, but without its nationalism, it wants a Europe united under its banner. Like China, it prefers a low profile and long-term, indeed, very long-term, strategies. With respect to the other great powers, however, it has one prime advantage: it does not own divisions.

When, 100 years after the unification of Italy, Pope John XXIII expressed his gratitude to Providence for having “guided it [Italy] through this process”, he meant it sincerely. Not having a territory to defend and citizens to oversee, the Church can therefore dedicate itself to a project of greater scope, without having to worry about the whims that influence the electorate’s feelings. Thanks to these enormous advantages, it can tackle its “prophetic” campaigns, which are often unpopular in the immediate (at least in the western world), but fruitful in the medium to long term, like the pro-natalist campaigns of the 60s and 70s, or that of the protection of immigrants or bioethics today.

2. It would be incorrect to say that the Catholic Church is not, like the other powers, suffering a decline, like the other powers. It is not just a case of lower attendance at Mass (a mostly western, and non-irreversible, problem). The decline that the Church fears is organizational decline, and the risk of not being able to keep hold of the reins of the most ancient and far-reaching organization that has ever existed in the world.

After the Second Vatican Council, the Church lived through years of crisis, of distress, and of the organizational erosion with a loss of authority in some sectors of the Catholic world, including some hierarchies, with a slump in “vocations”.

This crisis was most noticeable in Europe and in the United States. In Italy, in 1962, the year of the beginning of the Council, 30,595 seminarians were counted, the largest number in the postwar period; in 1968, there were but 25,570 and, in 1978, only 9,853, the lowest point of the century. France ordained in 1950 1,033 new priests; in 1965 only 646, and 97 in 1977, without mentioning the 4,000 defrocked ministers between 1965 and 1980. The trend was the same in the US, where the rate of ordinations fell from 994 in 1965 to 533 twenty years later. Globally, the figure went from 4,622 new ordinations in 1970 to 3,860 in 1980.

The inversion of this tendency began under Karol Wojtyła’s papacy. In 2000, the rate of new ordinations was already 6,814, up by 50% compared to thirty years earlier and double that of 1980; between 1978, the year of the election of John Paul II, and 2004, the number of seminarians increased by 76.9%, with a growth across all continents, except in Europe where the decrease was only 2.15%. The permanent deacons - laymen who perform some religious functions - increased 12.5 times between 1980 and 2005, with a sharp rise in the western world (in the United States, where almost half of the deacons are to be found, the growth was 17.7 times; in France, from 1995 to 2006, it grew almost four times).

The Polish pope fostered the sense of pride in being Catholic;

he decisively promoted centralization, appeased the malcontents and silenced the rebels. Upon more than one occasion, he stated that the Church cannot rule with democratic principles: "It is a mistake to apply American democratic procedures to the faith and the truth" he told the American journalist Wilton Wynn. "You cannot take a vote on the truth. You must not confuse the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) with 'consensus'". Cardinal Lustiger explained the link between the search for consensus and the crisis of the post-Council Church: "Confusion sometimes emerged between the *sensus fidelum* (sense of faith) and public opinion."

We should bear in mind that one of the more tenacious realities of the life of the Church is the complex dialectic between the central hierarchies (the Curia) and the local hierarchies (the bishops); it is not surprising, therefore, that some of the bishops wanted to interpret the great collegial debate of the Council as a symptom of relaxation of the central authority, and thus as a sign of greater freedom for them. If one espouses this reading of events, one necessarily interprets the reign of John Paul II - supported both in terms of doctrine and in discipline by Joseph Ratzinger - as a step backwards in regard to the Vatican Council II. It is amazing how many Catholics share this very particular point of view.

Yet, it is evident that an organization as big as the Church, if exposed to the changing winds of public opinion in numerous and sometimes antagonistic countries, would inevitably run the risk of disintegration. A more "Episcopal" and less "Papal" Church, to put it in rough terms, would become sooner or later a confederation of national Churches, leaving the Pope with a purely honorary function not dissimilar to that of the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople. It stands to reason that in this case it would lose all possibility of exerting influence upon the international scene.

Vatican II has certainly been much more affected by ideological arguments than was possibly foreseen. However, if one puts to one side the readings that those arguments implied, one can identify the Council not as a battle between the conservative and the progressive voices, but as a stage in the struggle against secularization. Whilst up until the Council, "modernity" had been opposed as one of the main reasons for the loss of influence of the Church, afterwards the idea prevailed that economic and social processes that weaken the religious feeling are an objective reality. To face them, therefore, it was necessary to change tactics, accepting, and even annexing, the aspects of "modernity" that were universally recognized as positive and, at the same time, denouncing all of its contradictions and cracks - war, hunger, exploitation, uncertainty - that are also objective reality as well.

Despite an apparently unambiguous title, consisting, as custom

dictates, of the first words of the text - Gaudium et spes - the final document of the Vatican II was concerned with «gaudium et spes, luctus et angor hominum huius temporis», i.e. with “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age.”

Coping with “modernity”, we could say, the Council applied a maxim of Chateaubriand, referring to revolution: “In the major revolutions, the talent that collides head on with the revolution is crushed; only the talent that follows it can master it”. In this respect, Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger should be considered the two most coherent executors of Vatican II, in which, not by chance, they belonged to the ranks of those considered as “progressive.”

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Will The New World Order Be Catholic? (2)

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Like secular big powers, the Vatican aims at countering its decline in a rapidly changing world. The task is not easy. But the Church's strategies look at the (very) long term.

3. To get an unsteady construction back on its feet, sense of belonging and stricter discipline are necessary but not sufficient conditions. They are not even sufficient when accompanied by the typical pragmatic malleability of the Church. In addition to this, a combination of favorable external circumstances is necessary. In this respect, Karol Wojtyła was lucky, or, for some, helped by Providence.

His election indeed took place after the end of the “Trentes Glorieuses”. The progressive voices, the believers in the continuous progress of humanity, began to lose their footing. The competition of the countries still described as “underdeveloped” dismantled bit by bit the artillery of Keynesianism and corroded the cornerstones of the welfare state. The “real socialist” countries were fighting among themselves and witnessing the biggest collapse of a political mythology ever experienced in so brief a period of time.

But more than just a crisis of ideals, there was a social crisis. The crisis of ideals affected a relatively small proportion of the western population, albeit vociferous thanks to the universities, podiums and television networks that were available to them; the social crisis got the vast majority of people to realize, for the first time since the end of the war, that there was the possibility that the future could be worse than the past. Furthermore, the frustration of losing what one has scarcely gained is always more destabilizing than the idea of never having it at all.

In the developing countries, different processes were leading to other social crises: industrialization was proceeding at full throttle; the traditional links of the rural family were being dismantled and millions of people were piling up in slums without streets and without services. From the outside, this was nothing that had not already been seen in Manchester in 1844 or in Turin in 1962; upon closer examination, though, the differences were manifold, mainly as a result of the speed with which this uprooting occurred, of the lack of social care, and the shift, often with very

little sense of transition, from a subsistence economy to a mercantile and monetary reality. For a farmer of the Khorasan, whose family lived through centuries of seasons and harvests, not only the discovery of the suburban carcinoma of South-Teheran, but also the appearance of a hitherto-unknown social aberration known as unemployment would prove upsetting.

The farmers of Manchester and of Turin could project their hopes and frustrations into a network of trade union solidarity; in Cairo, São Paulo and Karachi, on the contrary, these same workers encountered only police repression, or were pushed towards nationalist sentiments against the Zionist or Indian, or whichever enemy. In sum, they suffered all of the discomforts of development and none of its advantages. To top this all off, the dreams of glory promised from the nationalist campaigns ended in ruins as a result of irreconcilable internal rivalries and of repeated humiliations from abroad.

It is within this framework that grew, first inconspicuously and then manifestly, in the East as well as the West, the trend known variously as “the great awakening” or “the revenge of God”, or to put it plainly, “the desecularization of the world.”

On September 8, 1978, a huge demonstration was bloodily repressed in Teheran. In October, a general strike entirely paralyzed Iran. On the 10th of the same month, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini arrived in France in exile, thus becoming, in the eyes of the world, the leader of the incipient Iranian revolution. Six days later, in Rome, Karol Wojtyła was elected the 264th (using the official count) Pope of the Holy Roman Church.

4. By now we know a great deal about the conclave that elected the Polish pope. We know in particular that his nomination came about not as the result of a well thought-out strategic decision, but from the “atmosphere of conflict that gripped the Italian cardinals”, described for example by Andrea Riccardi, one of the major experts on the Vatican. In fact, the strategic framework had already been shaped ten years before, with Vatican II, with the decision to build upon the dialectic of development and crisis of contemporary society, a dialectic brilliantly summarized by Joseph Ratzinger in a text from 1997: “The Church can be modern only in being anti-modern”.

The key element of this strategy was emphasizing a particular crisis in developing society that, in the 60’s, could hardly be seen upon the horizon: the demographic crisis. Upon the 40th anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, various lectures and events were organized and *L’Osservatore Romano* published a long series of articles and essays in which the most frequent adjective was “prophetic.” The last report by the National Intelligence Council placed among the “key uncertainties” of the next 15 years

whether Europe and Japan can “overcome economic and social challenges caused or compounded by demography”. More explicitly, “lack of efforts by Europe and Japan to mitigate demographic challenges could lead to long-term declines”.

Today, the demographic crisis and its potential impact are plain to see. In 1968, when the baby boomers began to crowd the universities, the gloating Malthusianism of the intellectual world had an unprecedented authority. In that same year, amidst criticisms and derision, the Church published its encyclical on “the grave duty of transmitting human life”.

We could not say that the pro-birth campaigns of the Church - like its calls for peace or for the moralization of capitalism - had any perceptible results on this particular front. The demographic collapse was highly visible in Catholic countries such as Italy, Spain, and even more so, Poland. However, this focus on the issues connected with reproduction (divorce, abortion, contraception, homosexuality) had allowed and still allows the Church to obtain three main results: 1) to appear as the only global organization with a long-term vision of the problems of European development; 2) to lead nonconformist battles in such a way as to consolidate the cohesion and the identity of its activists; 3) to be present on the same moral ground occupied by all the other dynamic religious groups of the world, from the American Evangelists to the Russian Orthodox, to, of course, the various families of Islam.

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5. The long process of the formation of our current society was characterized by the progressive erosion of Catholicism. From the medieval communes to the French Revolution and the Kulturkampf, passing through the Reformation, the bourgeoisie has historically affirmed itself to some extent at the expense of the Church. In France, the biens nationaux - i.e. some of the possessions of the Church that were transferred to the Nation in November 1789 - offer one explanation of the successful alliance between the urban bourgeoisie and the peasant masses in the face of foreign attacks and the internal threat of counterrevolution.

If it is true that the Church managed to survive this trial, it is also true that its material strengths, its social role and, therefore, its moral authority were far from being intact. But it is also true that, afterwards, the Church had "step by step, grieved for its past", thanks also to some of the concessions they were accorded - from Napoleon's concordat to the fight against communism - by an often unsteady society.

The two historical moments in which this instability manifested itself in the most dramatic way are those that restituted to the Church - albeit in different ways to the past - a part of its old authority and the role of international player.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Vatican diplomacy was not enjoying great prestige. Diminished by the peace of Westphalia (1648), in the decades preceding the conflict it had lost even more credibility from its improbable attempt to restore the Papal States. Thirty years later, the race between Mussolini, Churchill and Roosevelt for its support showed that things had radically changed.

The turnaround came during the first conflict, when the collision of the opposing fronts of the three pillars of Catholic Europe - Austro-Hungary, France and Italy - and of two thirds of all the Catholics of the epoch threatened the very survival of the Church. Benedict XV played his more hazardous card, but also the only one

left in the deck: the fragile dialectic between the center and the periphery. Whilst the Vatican condemned the “useless massacre”, the national episcopacies organized and encouraged the “enthusiastic participation of Catholics in the war” in every single country.

At the same time, the Code of Canon Law was promulgated, an instrument of the most rigorous centralization that had ever been instituted by Rome up until that point. As always in the recent history of the Church, an amplification of the periphery’s responsibilities was accompanied by a fortifying of the instruments of control and discipline in the hands of the center.

Today everyone remembers Benedict XV’s call for peace and almost no one remembers the mobilization of the Catholic hierarchies in the service of the machines of war. At that time, the various national governments noticed the opposite: whilst the call had no effect, the engagement of the Catholics was helpful, indeed in some cases indispensable. “Exiled in their homeland”, until 1914, the French, Italian and German Catholics were readmitted after the war into the respective political communities, directly or indirectly. The French Republic, besides the creation of chaplaincies in boarding schools, prisons, hospitals and, of course, the army, recognized the authority of the diocesan structures of the clergy, thereby eliminating the most important obstacle presented by the law of separation of 1905.

The key to Catholic success was the combination of three factors: 1) the ability of the pope and of his counselors; 2) the preexistence of extensive social network, capable of cooperating efficiently with the wartime effort; 3) a historical situation in which disorientation, uncertainty and fear of the future was the dominant social psychology.

Having escaped from danger, indeed strengthened by this rehabilitation, the Vatican could begin to elaborate a long-term international strategy, prompted by the risk it had encountered: uprooting, naturally under its own aegis, the causes of Franco-German conflicts through an approach straddling the two banks of the Rhine. This was a strategy which, in the post-World War II period, would lead ultimately to the project of a united Europe.

6. One of the major differences - and the superiority - of the Catholic Church in comparison to other religious organisms, is the fact that it has a strategy, which is supported by a tested, deep-rooted and global structure. If it is true that “to him who knows not to what port he is bound, no wind is fair”, the opposite is also true: so, the stronger the winds that blow upon international relations, the more favorable they are for the navigation of the Church.

A few weeks before the beginning of WW II, Pius XII hoped that one day Europe, “educated, ennobled and civilized by the Cross”, would again be “the teacher of other peoples, of other continents”. Fifty years later, envisaging the strategic horizons for the third millennium - “planting the Cross in Asia” - John Paul II warned that no strategy of Catholic growth was possible if it did not come from a solid background of “traditionally Christian countries”. The two movements are inseparable: without the re-Christianization of Europe, the conquest of Asia would not be possible, but the aim of the conquest of Asia becomes in its turn one of the motivations - and one of the conditions - for the re-Christianization of Europe.

The Church is fundamentally a European institution, but also fundamentally has universal ambitions; this mystery of consubstantiality makes it an often-elusive actor in the global political and religious panorama. The powers cited at the beginning of this article, for example, have such universal ambitions, but find their basis hampered by national interests. Among the other religions, there are those that have universal ambitions but are lacking a national background from which to work (as in the case of Islam, and to a less extent, Evangelism); on the contrary, there are those whose national background is too restrictive and ends up sterilizing any possible universal ambitions (as is the case for the national Protestant and Orthodox Churches.)

The Catholic Church’s choices are often indigestible for the European public for the simple reason that they are part of this dual dynamic. For example, the Vatican’s rejection of the proposed decriminalization of homosexuality in the world takes into account the fact that whilst the great majority of the European population does not object to same-sex relations (83% of French people, 82% Spanish, 71% British, and 65% Italians); in other continents the perception is very different: in India, for example, only 10% of people accept it, 17% in China, 18% in Korea, 20% in Russia, 14% in Turkey and only 2% in Nigeria and in Ethiopia.

With its position, the Church is winning points on all these fronts: it gains credibility in the countries where it would like to have a growing influence and, in Europe, it insists on such issues, unpopular as they may be, which nevertheless touch the key questions regarding the future of the continent. This necessity to be at times unpopular “at home” explains why it is so urgent for the Church to preserve its own impermeability regarding the common sense.

Fundamentally, the logic is the same that carried the Church to “oppose the need for security with the respect of the rights of

immigrants", even at the cost of encountering a sharp polemic and criticism from the authorities and from public opinion. Everyone who focuses upon the question of immigration is aware that 1) mass migration is inevitable; 2) immigrants are indispensable for the industrial and the fiscal system of developing countries, particularly in a Europe, which is experiencing a severe demographic decline; 3) they generate tension in host countries, especially in times of crisis. For the politicians who are submitted to the erratic mood of the electorate, it is an unsolvable puzzle; only the Church, among the major institutions, could try to solve it.

Thanks to its proclaimed status as minority, the Church is able to work upon both fronts: on the one hand, insisting that Europe affirm its Christian identity; on the other hand, presenting itself to immigrants as the only major institution capable of defending them and offering structures of welcome and integration. The message sent to Europe and to immigrants is extremely clear: by claiming our religious identity, we Europeans can take advantage of immigrant labor, and at the same time attenuate the tensions that the presence of the immigrants may cause.

This message is not the umpteenth moral warning to correct the contradictions of capitalism; rather, it represents the core of the Vatican strategy of the "re-conquest" of Europe. In perfect harmony with the spirit of the Vatican Council, Benedict XVI explained during his visit to Germany in September 2006: "People in Africa and Asia admire, indeed, the scientific and technical prowess of the West, but they are frightened by a form of rationality which totally excludes God from man's vision, as if this were the highest form of reason, and one to be taught to their cultures too. [...] This sense of respect can be reborn in the Western world only if faith in God is reborn, if God become once more present to us and in us."

7. Samuel Huntington affirms that, regarding the decline of the West, moral factors weigh more heavily than economic and demographic ones. Among other reasons, Huntington refers to "increases in antisocial behavior", "family decay", "general weakening of the 'work ethic' and rise of cult of personal indulgence", concluding that those trends "give rise to the assertions of moral superiority by Muslims and Asians".

The Catholic Church, in welding the moral factors to the economic and demographic ones, shows itself to be more "materialistic" than Huntington; and it is for this reason that, though sharing the analysis of critical factors, it arrives at the opposite conclusion to him.

Future conflicts will continue to exploit ethnic and religious

differences. Taking the opposite tack, the Church tries simultaneously to deactivate this weapon, and reduce the possibility of being shot.

The combination of the “new evangelization” of the “traditionally Christian countries” and the conquest of Asia, “toward which the Church’s mission ad gentes ought to be chiefly directed”, seems to anticipate some geopolitical trends that contradict Huntington’s theses. These trends, exacerbated by the crisis, are at the very center of the American geopolitical debate today concerning the shift of power. Huntington saw the “Sinic” and Muslim civilizations fall into each other’s arms, which a revitalized West (i.e. US plus Europe) should oppose.

A part of the debate that is going on today in the US, on the contrary, points to the transformation of the confidence born out of the economic interdependence between Washington and Beijing before the crisis into something more structural; for example, Kissinger’s suggestion “to shape trans-Pacific relations into a design for a common destiny, much as was done with trans-Atlantic relations in the immediate postwar period”.

There is no trace of the Church in this debate - and this can only please the Vatican’s monsignori, who know perfectly well that, when they are put on the spot, it is often with the purpose of influencing them. So, the monsignori, in a profitable silence, can plan to bring to the “shift of power” the surplus value of a European moral leadership.

Again, in the eyes of the Church, the Europe, “educated, ennobled and civilized by the Cross”, could recuperate the credibility squandered on national trifles and effectively become a “teacher of other peoples and other continents”. Especially - and herein lies the specific interest of the Church - if these people and these continents are destined to become the center of gravity of the future geopolitical balance.

Whilst it is not irreversible, as the crisis is demonstrating, the lower attendance at Mass is a typically western occurrence, unknown in Africa and in Asia, (an exception being the Middle East, but for entirely different reasons). If the increase in vocations in these two continents is decisive for the repopulation of the clergy in the West, it is not sufficient to satisfy the needs of a local flock, which is even more rapidly increasing.

In many dioceses in Kerala, for instance, the level of attendance at Mass exceeds 80%; from the diocese of Irinjalakuda, where the parishes went from 78 in 1978 to 129 in 2008, come ten of the 800 Indian priests that are currently exercising their function in the US - but also three in Germany, two in Great Britain and four that are

studying in Rome. It seems that the same tendency is recorded in China, although the Catholics are still split into two Churches, one recognizing the government and one recognizing the Vatican.

However, the most important thing, for Rome's geopolitical prospects, is the existence of a growing demand for religious representation coming from grassroots level, a demand which could be used as a basis for talks with different governments. Its negotiating position is naturally all the stronger when the Church is able to help the central authority to resolve any social and political problems, especially in times of crisis: contributing to the levels of social protection with structures like schools, hospitals and rest homes, open also to non-Catholics, like in India; contributing to the control and to the discipline of the tensions in a country like in China, where 90,000 "mass incidents" (i.e. strikes) were recorded in 2006, when the rate of growth was around 10%, and where today it is coming down to below the risk threshold of 7%.

In his Jesus in Beijing, which came out in 2003, David Aikman argues that, given the current rate of growth of its various Christian communities, in three decades China will be "Christianized"; this will determine, as his subtitle indicates, a transformation of the global balance of power. For example, Aikman states, "a Christianized China may spend less time thinking of ways to outmaneuver and neutralize the United States than the military strategist of the current regime".

Concerning the third vertex of this hypothetical triangle - the United States -, the possibility that the Catholic Church could play a growing part is already a reality. At Paul VI's funeral, the US was represented by the senator of Massachusetts, the Catholic Edward Kennedy; at that of John Paul II, there were the president in office, the last two former presidents and the secretary of state, all of them protestant.

When Benedict XVI visited the US in April 2008, the media reception was much greater than his predecessor had ever received, appearing on the front page of the New York Times for an entire week, and his visit was also broadcast live on channel NY1. The two candidates to the vice-presidency in 2008 were both baptized Catholics. Besides the vice-president Joe Biden and the speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Catholics represent 8 out of the 15 members of the first version of the Obama administration (Bill Richardson and Tom Daschl having resigned, but the Catholic Kathleen Sebelius took Daschl's post of Secretary of Health), Obama's "fixer" Jim Messina and the new director of the CIA, Leon Edward Panetta. If we add to this 5 of the 9 judges of the Supreme Court, we can but note that the weight of Catholics in American politics exceeds greatly their proportion - around a

quarter - on the population.

In the future, things could get even better for North American Catholics. In August 2008, the Census Bureau predicted that the population of Anglo-Saxon origins would become the minority by 2042. In particular, the Latino population would grow from 15% to 30%. If we add to this the Catholics of Irish, Italian, Polish, Filipino and German origins, they could soon become the majority of the population.

8. The geopolitical prospects of the Church, in particular in China, will certainly profit from the growing weight of Christianity in certain areas of the Far East, like Vietnam, Korea and Japan. In the latter two countries in particular, the Catholics have more political influence than their own proportion of the population, albeit not at the level of the US. For example, it is not implausible that a Catholic Japanese foreign minister - like Taro Aso, who became prime minister in September 2008 - and a Catholic Korean president - like Roh Moo-hyun, who came into office in February 2008 - could benefit from the common background, even if it did not have any direct institutional and religious implications.

But above all, an exhaustive analysis of the geopolitical prospects of the Church cannot fail to mention its attractiveness for those who are looking for a response to the "crisis of modernity" in the traditional system of values. To put it crudely, we can summarize in the following way: according to their moral convictions, it is probable that a pro-life American feels himself to be better represented by Benedict XVI than by the Protestant Obama. What we can see is that the historical anti-papal hostility of many Protestant denominations is generally (with the exception of some liberal voices) transformed into admiration and often, agreement. Some even made the assumption that the traditionalist Anglicans who had deserted the Lambeth conference of July 2008 would attempt a rapprochement with the Church of Rome. According to the Jesuit scholar Keith Peclers' comment in *The Economist*, however, this is "the last thing the pope would wish".

The Church does not renounce, of course, the idea of welcoming the converted, and chose to do so either discreetly (e.g. in the case of Tony Blair) or sensationally (as with Magdi Allam), when it wishes to reaffirm its inalienable right. Nevertheless, it is far from promoting a "campaign of proselytism", which would be met with hostility - as seen in the Patriarch of Moscow's reaction to the restructuring of the Russian Catholic dioceses in 2002, or in the anti-Catholic pogroms in the Indian state of Orissa in summer 2008. Why stir up conflicts, when dialogue - and time - could offer much more precious results?

Indeed, even dialogue itself can pose some problems. The

principal is that of finding interlocutors, for example in two very important cases for the Vatican hierarchy: Orthodoxy and Islam. In the first case, the possible interlocutors are too numerous, at least one for each Orthodox state, sometimes even more than one, as in the case of Ukraine. In the second case, there are too few, and it is difficult to individuate them.

Concerning Orthodoxy, the attention of the Vatican is fixed upon the Patriarch of Constantinople, the *primus inter pares* among his fellow bishops; even though in Rome everyone is aware that, without the backing of the Patriarch of Moscow, any contact with Istanbul would be merely symbolic.

Concerning Islam, the *lectio magistralis* of Ratisbona in September 2006 eventually led a group of Muslim intellectuals and leaders to stand up with the famous “letter of 138” - A Common Word Between Us and You - about “love of the One God, and love of the neighbor”. After this letter, the Muslim-Catholic forum was founded and gathered for the first time in November 2008 in Vatican City.

The second factor, as we have stated, is time. It is more than likely that, within the Church, someone thought of doing - *si parva licet componere magnis* - what the shrewdest members of the old Italian Communist Party leaders did towards the handful of leftist groups in the 70s: allowing them to vent, alternating between reprimand and opening, and waiting for the storm to die down, being aware that, on a common ideological ground, the winners are eventually those who take a firm grip upon the most solid link in the chain, as Lenin deemed it: that of organization. We are no longer at the time of the dispute around the filioque, and any theological compromise would of course be impossible.

So, the Anglicans, the Orthodox, the Evangelists, the Sunnis and the Shia could keep practicing their own faiths and follow their own teachings; but when it is a question of moral, religious or political issues, they will end up, sooner or later, in Rome. And there have already been many to start the pilgrimage.

9. General de Gaulle, who considered himself second to none, could only have been sincere when, in the 60s, he said to the then chaplain of the Sorbonne, Jean-Marie Lustiger, that the Church had 50 years advantage over other world leaders. This advantage, as we have stated, is upheld by its long-term strategic vision. Nevertheless, none know better than the *monsignori* of the Vatican that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The dialectic between the pacifist universalism and the warmongering nationalism during the WW I did not take into account the Russian Revolution. The attempted reconciliation of France and Germany in the interwar years did not take into

account the rise of Nazism. Today, it is difficult to foresee how extensively the Vatican will be obligated to take into account the growing protectionist tendencies.

In September 1976, in New York, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła

admonished the faithful claiming that humanity was close to “the greatest historical confrontation ever experienced”. Once he became Pope, on various occasions he repeated that “humanity can either make of the world a garden or reduce it to a heap of rubble”. “The threat of Judgment concerns us, the Church in Europe, Europe and the West in general”, his successor added, opening the first Synod of bishops in October 2005.

For those who are aware of the mechanisms of our society, as men of the Church, the prophecy of the apocalypse is an easy prophecy. It is realized daily in the four corners of the world, and knows no no-man’s land, as the present crisis largely demonstrates. This “prophetic” consciousness is the core of the strategic advantage the Church enjoys over all other world leaders.

(translated by Sara Bielecki)