

Is the west Christian?

Dean A. Hoffman

North American Affairs
Occidental Studies Institute



In an emblematic scene set in the quiet courtyard of a venerable Italian cathedral during the conclusion of Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy, the papabile Cardinal Lamberto, convincingly played by veteran actor Raf Vallone, presages his attempt to persuade Al Pacino's ailing Michael Corleone to confess his sins by breaking a pebble drawn from a nearby fountain as an exemplum.

Look at this stone. It has been lying in the water for a very long time, but the water has not penetrated. Look – perfectly dry! The same thing has happened to men in Europe. For centuries they have been surrounded by Christianity, but Christ has not penetrated. Christ does not live within them.

Steeped in moral corruption after decades of building an empire of wealth and privilege from organized crime and increasingly debilitated by his guilt over having ordered the death of his pathetic brother Fredo, Michael will unexpectedly make a thorough confession of his many mortal sins hearkening back to his initiation into his father's chosen life – his execution of the mobster Sollozzo and the degraded police officer McCluskey – only to receive temporal punishment in due course by witnessing his beloved daughter Mary taking a fatal bullet that was intended for himself.

For any cineaste with Catholic sympathies, this surprising vindication of orthodoxy from the essentially agnostic Coppola can be considered a redeeming dramatic factor in what is by common consent the disappointing final chapter of an otherwise compelling American crime saga. Yet it also stands as a day-late and dollar-short reminder of the decadent state of contemporary Western Christianity, an issue that has been recently addressed by French political scientist Olivier Roy's latest work, whose title – *Is Europe Christian?* – unwittingly echoes the language of Coppola's fictional future Pope John Paul I.

Discussing the ostensible *raison d'être* of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 65), an aggiornamento that would renew the Church through dialogue with the secular world, Roy references its disastrous unintended consequences, particularly the evisceration of Catholic ritual, liturgy, iconography, and doctrine, amounting to a virtual Protestantization of the faith that has in turn led to a post-Christian skepticism bordering on atheism – in short, a wholesale secularization of religion. In one particularly astute observation, Roy notes that the loss of the Church's original liturgical language has allowed euphemism to take a destructive turn toward sophistry, resulting in a reorientation from the spiritual world to the temporal:

The conversion from Latin to vernacular languages goes beyond the matter of translation: in French, it entailed a theological re-evaluation or

reorientation. In sermons, for instance, the devil steps back, even disappears [sic]. The sacrament of penance becomes that of "reconciliation." "Extreme unction" becomes the "anointing of the sick," and instead of preparing the soul for passing, the hope of an earthly cure or improvement is expressed. In any case, it is life here on Earth that matters.

This larger, cultural transformation that in Roy's view has allowed the secular to triumph over the sacred has clearly produced not a synthesis between Catholicism and Modernism but something that is less than the sum of these parts.

While Christianity remains the majority religion in most EU countries, Europe continues on its post-Christian trajectory, as illustrated by a growing percentage of citizens who self-identify as atheist or agnostic, particularly in Western European countries. The Islamic diaspora into Europe has been accommodated, despite the possible threat of the formation of terrorist cells within its sovereign nations, to the point of encompassing six percent of its overall population. Perhaps the most astonishing example of the decay of the Christian ethos is provided by Ireland, once a hotbed of Catholicism, which has ironically witnessed declining church membership and the acceptance of such prohibited practices as abortion and same-sex marriage.

In light of this state of affairs, we would do well to recall Christ's simple but profound observation that the tree is known by its fruit. For if as Roy avers, Europe has become so pagan as to be "Christianophobic" in the eyes of the Church, this clearly raises the issue of its own part in encouraging, however indirectly, this moral and cultural dissipation throughout the Western world. In the US Catholic Church, the fallout from Vatican II has been exemplified by a precipitous decline in the number of priests and nuns since the close of the council, as is verified by a pronounced shortage of diocesan pastors, the shuttering of seminaries, and increasingly frequent prayers during Mass for vocations to the religious life. Recent surveys reveal that almost 70% of US Catholics believe the Eucharist is purely symbolic and does not embody the real presence of Christ, and that nearly 80% of professed US Catholics do not attend mandatory Mass regularly.

Meanwhile, deference to artificial birth control, legal abortion, divorce, and remarriage have become commonplace within the American church, despite the gauntlet thrown down in 1968 by Paul VI with the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Nominal Catholic agencies and charities continue to promote contraception and abortion, expressly violating the Church's pro-life position. And there is a growing perception among the faithful of an apparent lack of supernatural faith among prominent members of the United States Council of Catholic Bishops, whose public schmoozing with popular pro-choice politicians is becoming in-

creasingly candid and self-conscious.

Yet nothing has proven to be more destructive to Catholic integrity – one predicated on belief in natural law and the discipline of celibacy as an essential requirement of its priesthood – than the prevalence of homosexuality within its clerical ranks. Longstanding incidents of pedophilia among the Catholic clergy continue to be revealed on a fairly regular basis, a monstrous public spectacle that has laid waste the lives of innumerable individuals and families and has for all intents and purposes redefined the Church in the court of public opinion. Even the schismatic Society of St. Pius X founded in 1970 by French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre – a defiant traditionalist order and practitioner of the very same Latin Mass that conservative Catholics cherish as the key to restoration of holiness within the clergy and reverence among the laity – has itself recently been revealed as having been ravaged for many years by sexual corruption. The heartfelt prayers of those many Catholics for the reconciliation of this order to Rome in hope of reversing the damage of Vatican II now appear to be utterly futile.

Reportedly overwhelmed by the evidence of sexual misconduct in the clergy that had gone so far as to infiltrate the Curia, Pope Benedict XVI resigned in 2013, paving the way for Pope Francis, who although recognized as the supreme head of the Church, remains an enigma among today's Catholics, both liberal and traditionalist. While no particular scandal has been attached to his pontificate, rumors persist among conservative Catholics that his election owed significantly to the machinations of the so-called "St. Gallen mafia," an informal group of progressive cardinals that is based in Switzerland and who advocate radical change in the Church's teachings on such issues as sexuality, Hell, birth control, and the male-only priesthood. His recent blessing of pagan fertility goddess statues within the Vatican not only provoked accusations of idolatry and profanation from both clerics and laity, but also inspired two visiting Austrian youths to snatch the images and fling them into the Tiber.

In his capacity as leader of a sovereign state, Pope Francis's activism on such issues as climate change and open borders continues, as does a lingering suspicion of his Deep State affinities, a situation not helped by his statement to *La Repubblica* that the United States must submit immediately to a world government "for [its] own good." Perhaps his most illustrative expression for latter-day Catholics has been the public utterance by their ultimate earthly authority on faith and morals of the non sequitur "Who am I to judge?" in answer to a prospective confession by a homosexual individual, rather than a variant of the more doctrinaire precept of "hate the sin but love the sinner."

Olivier Roy poses the intriguing question of whether the future of the Christian West will be represented by those Catholics who have exchan-

ged localized culture for the pursuit of an individual relationship with God or the prioritization of emotion over knowledge and of the laity over the priesthood through such undertakings as Focolare or Sant'Egidio – organizations which have notable affinities with the ecumenism of Vatican II, to whom one might also add the Communion and Liberation movement or the prelature Opus Dei. Growth in clerical vocations remains slow but steady in such traditionalist orders as the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, whose influence on burgeoning Latin Mass communities throughout Europe and the United States has constituted an effectual resistance movement to Vatican II.

But Western Civilization's vulnerability to the temptation toward agnosticism, materialism, and a wholesale rejection of spirituality remains, as is occasionally evident in the conduct of even the most sanctimonious members of the faithful. When my own vestigial acceptance of contraception was challenged by a Scottish bishop thirty years ago during the process of my conversion from Protestant to Papist, his strategy of persuasion was indeed worthy of Cardinal Lambertoni. Fixing me with an unwavering stare, he gently but firmly reminded me, "You know what the Church teaches!"

While debates will continue to rage over the credit that the Catholic Church might deserve for the creation and promulgation of Western culture, its discredit and marginalization will be virtually assured by its own abdication of its mission to preserve and propagate true faith and morality. For any contemporary practicing Catholic, the near-immolation last year of Notre Dame cathedral – a centuries-old monument to Christian Europe and Western Civilization – must necessarily be interpreted as a warning and an imperative: Like the vulnerable structure that represents it, Western Christianity and its identity as a fulcrum of civilization can indeed be saved, but it is in a truly precarious state and can be all but lost at this point in history through a momentary lapse of vigilance. Denominational differences notwithstanding, no professed Christians can begin to fulfill their baptismal vows let alone create an exemplary culture without knowing and practicing their received doctrine. While there is still time, let us hesitate no longer to learn what the Church teaches.