

Mutations in Church History

Paul Collins*

The Catholic Church is in constant flux; change is of the essence of its being. Cardinal John Henry Newman says that an idea, by which he means a reality like Catholicism, 'changes... in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often' (J.H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, London: Longmans, Green, 1887, p 40). In fact the Church has been through several far-reaching realignments in its history. Newman says that there were three important ones. I would argue that there were, in fact, at least five such transitions or realignments. I think it is more accurate to call them 'mutations'.

I chose this word 'mutation' from biology because it conveys a sense of both radical transformation and continuity. Biologically it refers to a process that changes the DNA sequence of an organism; that is a genetic change occurs. Such a change normally affects most or all aspects of the organism's life. Despite change and discontinuity, however, the new reality is deeply rooted in and is the result of all that has gone before. It is, essentially, a response to new circumstances and new challenges. Recently there has been a debate within Catholicism regarding the interpretation of Vatican Council II which re-ignited the 'culture wars' within Catholicism in the early-2000s. Crudely put, the debate focused on whether Vatican II was in continuity with the Catholic tradition, or constituted a 'rupture' or disjunctive discontinuity, by introducing entirely 'new' theologies and practices into the Church. There was much talk of 'the hermeneutics of continuity and rupture'. The most prominent champion of the so-called continuity school was Benedict XVI although his remarks were somewhat more nuanced than those of, for instance, the Italian Cardinal Camillo Ruini who simply used these 'hermeneutics' as a way of attacking those progressive Italian Catholics he particularly disliked.

This utterly false dichotomy between 'continuity' and 'rupture' was presented as a scenario in which the continuity school pretended that nothing substantial changed at Vatican II and the Church continued with business as usual, and the rupture school said that everything changed at the Council with a kind of completely 'new church' emerging. As the English Catholic weekly *The Tablet* (6 October 2012) pointed out Benedict XVI 'fully acknowledged the tension between continuity and reform that characterised much of the council's debates, with more continuity in one place, more reform in another. There is no papal mandate for imposing a hermeneutic of continuity on all of it – the view that the Council fundamentally changed nothing.' The hermeneutics of 'rupture' and 'continuity' was nothing more than a caricature.

What is clear is that the Church, like Vatican II is constantly involved in a process of change, sometimes at a snail's pace, sometimes quickly and suddenly. It is these sudden mutations that are the most interesting and we can distinguish at least five of them through which Catholicism has already passed.

- The first mutation was in the late-New Testament period and the century immediately following it. The church emerged from its Jewish matrix to become adjusted to the reality of life in the gentile Roman world. It abandoned Jewish practices and categories and entered into Hellenistic culture by seeking and finding in the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus a philosophy to underpin its theology. In a way, this was the period when Jesus' notion of the 'kingdom of God' evolved rather rapidly into the Christian-Catholic Church. The process of institutionalization had begun. This mutation merges into and becomes the underpinning for the second mutation.

- The second was when Christianity emerged from being a persecuted if rather large minority community, especially in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, to become eventually the official religion of the late-Roman world. This happened during and after the reign of Constantine the Great (from 313AD onwards). The church now ceased being a sub-culture and had to adjust to being part of the real world of politics and secular affairs.

- Although not widely recognized there was a third, long drawn-out mutation when the Church adapted itself to the post-Roman world in Western Europe and in a vigorous missionary expansion, converted the barbarian tribes that had invaded the Roman world to Christianity. This period also sees the gradual alienation of Western Christianity from the Orthodox Christianity of the Byzantine world, especially after the establishment of the Carolingian empire and the coronation of Charlemagne in 800AD.

- The fourth mutation was what is now known as the 'Gregorian reform' in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This came after the German emperors following Otto I (936-973) had reformed the utterly corrupt papacy of the tenth century. A series of popes both before and especially after Gregory VII (1073-1085) asserted their independence of the German emperors and attempted to gain complete clerical control of the Church by eliminating and breaking any form of lay influence. This resulted in a massive struggle between papacy and empire as to which was supreme in Christendom. In the end the papacy won claiming the *plenitudo potestatis* (the fullness of power in both church and State), but it was a pyrrhic victory. (For this see Paul Collins, *Upon This Rock. The Popes and their Changing Role*, Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp 118-154). What was most important in this process was that the Church became increasingly hierarchical and centralised, the distinction between laity and clergy became entrenched, and the Western clergy had celibacy and a semi-monastic life style imposed on them. The hierarchical structure of the Church as we know it today finds its origin in this period.

- The fifth mutation was the Counter-Reformation of the late-sixteenth century. A vast change swept over the Church in response to the Protestant Reformation. Following on from the Council of Trent (1545-1563) there was widespread remodelling of the liturgy, the role of the priesthood and reform of the religious life. The papacy adopted 'absolutist' models of administration from the

secular notion of the 'divine right of kings' (a notion given theological form by the Jesuit Cardinal Robert Bellarmine). The Roman curia as we know it today emerged to support a 'divine right' papacy and a somewhat ostentatious baroque spirituality and religiosity emerged. This model took on an even more complete form in First Vatican Council's (1870) definition of the primacy and infallibility of the pope.

- Today we are in the middle of another mutation that may well be more far-reaching than anything Catholicism has previously experienced. I say this because for the first time the Church is truly universal and is no longer dominated by Western culture or European preoccupations. This is the period from Vatican Council II onwards in which, as Karl Rahner says, the 'sphere of the Church's life is in fact the entire world' ('Toward a fundamental theological interpretation of Vatican II', *Theological Studies*, 40(1979), p 721). Of course we don't know exactly what the shape of this new world will be and therefore it is impossible to be prescriptive about what the Catholicism of the future will look like. However, of one thing we can be certain: it will be very different to the Church of the two previous mutations.

© Paul Collins, February 2015, from part of a book currently under preparation by this writer. Used with permission.

Republished November 2023 with permission

Catholics For Renewal