

A Disappointing Tale: The Dutch Catholic Church 1970—1985

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On the 12th of May Pope John Paul II will arrive in Holland for his pastoral visit to the Dutch Church. What kind of Church will he meet? It will be a different Church from the Church that drew the attention of almost the whole western Christian world in the sixties. The bishops are very different, and because the Second Vatican Council changed in many ways the theology but not the organisation, the bishops still largely determine the policy. Changing the bishops still means changing the Church, in spite of all the talk about participation of the laity.

We must start with a little chronology. In the seven dioceses in Holland only two bishops may now be considered to be more or less sympathetic with the Church of the sixties, and both of these seem to be afraid to express their sympathy clearly and publicly. Since the restoration of the hierarchy in 1853 the chapter of a diocese where the bishop has died or resigned has had the right to propose, through the nuncio, three names to the Pope. The Pope has never been obliged to appoint any of those proposed, and sometimes he did not. However, since 1979 not one of the names of the appointed bishops has been on any of the lists of the chapters. In December 1970 a young conservative curate, A. Simonis, was made bishop of Rotterdam. Cardinal Alfrink and his colleagues hesitated for some time to ordain him, but after his promise to cooperate with the other bishops they decided to accept him. In the sermon at his ordination Cardinal Alfrink told him: "A bishop should not be a representative of a certain wing, but a shepherd of the whole flock, a builder of bridges". He expressed the hope that such an appointment would never be made again. But, two years later, J. Gijssen was made bishop of Roermond, a reactionary man and, unlike Simonis, a man with no talent for human communication. Even at his ordination for the priesthood many had had doubts about his suitability. To avoid problems, he was ordained bishop by Pope Paul VI himself in Rome.

When Cardinal Alfrink resigned in 1975 he was succeeded by Cardinal J. Willebrands, the Dutchman who had been heading the Secretariat of Christian Unity in Rome. Willebrands did not succeed in "overcoming polarisation and re-establishing unity within the

Dutch bishops' conference'', as his task was formulated by the Pope. It is interesting to note that the Pope interpreted the dynamic changes in the Netherlands, which evoked quite naturally many anxieties among a lot of Catholics in Holland and among the Vatican leadership, as mainly a conflict within the bosom of the Dutch bishops' conference. In his eyes the bishops were not in control of the Church because they could not decide on a common course of action. Pope John Paul II held the same view, and called a special Synod of the Dutch bishops in Rome in January 1980. The pressure on the bishops was very great, the meetings were often painful, and at the end the bishops signed a document that was supposed to restore peace and tranquillity in the Dutch Church.

The main thought in this document was that there was an "essential difference" between ministry and laity, and this difference was interpreted as meaning that the laity is always subject to the bishops (and priests) in matters of faith. While it is the task of the bishops to explain and uphold the right contents of faith, the laity is supposed to put this faith into action within politics, family life and labour, where the bishops and priests should be absent. The Church as a whole was described in neo-platonic rather than biblical terms: it forms a pyramid with the pope at the top, followed by the bishops, priests, religious, laymen, laywomen and finally the priests who have received dispensations from their priesthood. One year after the Synod Cardinal Willebrands had to admit that the results of the Synod had not lived up to his expectations: "The conflicts have reappeared in all their strength".

In January 1982 four auxiliary bishops were appointed in three dioceses. Only one of them, Mgr. Nienhaus, is considered to be a man of dialogue. On 8 July 1983 Mgr. A. Simonis was appointed archbishop of Utrecht as the successor of Cardinal Willebrands, who resigned because of age. Publicly Willebrands declared that he was not at all happy about his successor; clearly he had lost all his influence at the Vatican, to which he returned to become again the full-time leader of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. When I briefly met the Pope at an audience for the members of the General Chapter of the Dominican Order in Rome at the beginning of September 1983 I told him that most people, myself included, were not happy with the appointment of Mgr. Simonis. After a moment of slight surprise he replied: "You may become happy later". I did not, for on 21 October the former auxiliary of Mgr. Simonis became his successor at Rotterdam and, on the same day, Mgr. H. Bomers, since 1965 bishop in a remote part of Ethiopia, became bishop of Haarlem with, as his auxiliary, J. Lescrauwaet, a Dutch theologian who taught in Belgium, at Louvain. Bomers succeeded Mgr. Th. Zwartkruis, who retired because of age. When Zwartkruis had been in Rome during the

summer he had asked whether there was any news of his possible successor, and he had been told that there was none. He was informed a couple of days before his successor's name was made public. On the day of the announcement he fell ill and within hours was dead.

The mopping-up operation was not yet ended. One month later the bishop of 's-Hertogenbosch, Mgr. J. Bluysen, a very pastoral bishop and the only one left of those who had taken part in Vatican II, had to resign because of ill-health. On 2 February this year Mgr. J. Ter Schure (who in an interview which he had given two months previously, after he had been made an auxiliary bishop in Bishop Gijzen's diocese, had declared that every wish of the Pope was for him a command) was unexpectedly named as Bluysen's successor. This triggered off a great stir in the diocese and in the whole country. The canons of the diocese met on the following day and rejected the appointment; they decided to write a letter to the Pope to express their feelings of alarm.

This chronology clearly shows what is the policy of the present Pope: the appointment of many bishops, so that all the different councils that exist in the Dutch Church, such as for the liturgy, theological training and pastoral work, can be headed and controlled by a bishop. If possible the new bishops should be "foreigners", men who have not been tainted by "the Dutch disease" and whose loyalty to the Pope is in no doubt. This policy should do the trick and heal the ailing Church of Holland. I use medical terms here deliberately. Our western medicine goes back to demonology, and works on the assumption that a person feels ill because he carries within him alien entities—cancerous cells or a virus or certain bacteria. One heals the person by tracking these down and driving them out as a scapegoat. Scapegoating is very popular in the Dutch Church, mainly in conservative quarters but in progressive groups too. Archbishop Simonis is convinced that the "liberal-minded" Catholics are the cause of all the present problems, and should be robbed of influence. Father J. Bots SJ, an intelligent historian, from an aristocratic family, who publishes in many papers abroad, is convinced that the bourgeois intellectuals are the cause of the present state of affairs, for they deceived the ordinary people. The *Katholiek Nieuwsblad*, a conservative paper that is published twice a week and still hopes to become a daily, is convinced that the media, especially television, uprooted the people. Many progressives place the burden of guilt squarely on the side of the Pope and the bishops.

Whatever the present Pope may think to be the causes of the developments in the Dutch Church, he certainly sees chaos, disorder, confusion ... and what other medicine is needed than re-establishing the structures, creating order where there is disorder, explaining the contents of faith where there is confusion? Apart from the

background of his Polish tradition, where national unity and unity in faith go hand in hand, he stands in traditions of which one is very ancient and the other fairly recent.

The first tradition is that chaos can only be overcome by making distinctions, by creating differences, by providing structures. The story of the creation in Genesis chapter 1 is in this tradition. However, until modern times the only way differences and distinctions were made was by placing one on top of the other—God and the world, soul and body, man and woman, priest and layman, knight and commoner—so that a kind of hierarchy emerged. Philosophers such as Plotinus and theologians such as Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite worked this out in great detail and devised a chain of beings from above to below by which they were able to interpret and understand the whole of reality. Basically there is always a twofold division: God, soul, man, priest, knight, ruling over what should be obedient to what is higher: world, body, woman, layman, commoner. As long as everybody is kept in his or her place order rules, chaos can be avoided, conflicts can be prevented or, when they occur, can be solved within the terms of this system. What the Pope is doing in Holland (and actually also in the rest of the world as well) is reinforcing this extremely old order, placing God above the world, the spiritual above the material, the clergy above the laity, man above woman.

The second tradition partly follows from this one. In the course of the last couple of centuries, since the industrial revolution and the French Revolution, our culture has changed fundamentally. What we have seen is a shift away from the old differences and towards the kind of equality and freedom that should in theory enable everybody to compete with everybody: employers with employers and employees, employees with employers and among themselves, men with women, children with parents. This has given our culture a tremendous mobility, of which the private car has become the symbol: everything should be possible for everybody. Free competition is not only an economic value, it is the highest cultural value. Only slowly do we recognise that some of the fruits of our freedom and equality are very bitter indeed: loneliness and fragmentation in our society, a world of which two-thirds is starving.

The Christian Church cannot possibly be reconciled with modern culture. She tries to survive by keeping to the old traditions as much as possible, setting up a bureaucratic and centralised system as a defence against the modern bureaucratic and centralized state, promoting inner unity and uniformity in a world where church and culture are no longer close to each other, as they were when christianity was all-pervasive, on the street-corners, in politics, in the family. It just happens that what the Pope is trying to do everywhere he is doing in Holland in an extra dramatic way.

What made Holland special was that the new culture of straightforward competition came late to it and thus caused more tension and anxiety. The Netherlands was always different from other countries in Europe in that it hardly knew an aristocracy. It was and remains a merchant country where already in the late middle ages half the population was living in cities, and where the central government was weak. This hotch-potch of small states survived because for many centuries they could direct their aggression against the outside world, and—within limits—one city, Amsterdam, could dominate the rest. The present constitutionally united state was formed in the last century, and from the very beginning it was in reality a very divided state, a state without a class system but consisting of three groups of people of more or less equal strength: the Catholics, the Protestants and the Liberals. The last group had the upper hand for a long time, but when the Liberals refused to make the state subsidize the private schools run by Catholics and Protestants a long power struggle started. The Protestants formed a political party, called the “Anti-revolutionary Party” (i.e. against the principles of the French Revolution), and established other organisations they needed to achieve their goal. The Catholics, more timid because of three centuries of oppression, followed suit, and the Liberals (i.e. supporters of the ideas of the French Revolution) were forced to build up their party and organisations too. At the end of the nineteenth century a fourth party also emerged, the “Socialist Party”, but culturally it identified with those dependent on the principles of the French Revolution.

Originally because of the school system, and later as a consequence of tradition, all organisations were modelled on the three-groups system. This social process is called “pillarisation”: Holland was (and to some extent still is) a country based on three pillars. The Catholic pillar, with a Church, a political party, schools, a trade union, a union of employers, papers, a broadcasting organisation, housing corporations, a university, hospitals. The Protestant pillar, with several Churches, two political parties, schools, a trade union, a union of employers, papers, broadcasting organisation, housing corporations, a university, hospitals. The Liberals and Socialists formed the “secular pillar”: they shared the same state schools, universities and hospitals, but there is a Liberal and a Socialist party, a Liberal union of employers, Liberal papers and Liberal broadcasting, a Socialist trade union, socialist papers, Socialist broadcasting and housing corporations. In principle it was possible to be a Catholic and to move around in the Catholic pillar without ever having intense social intercourse with a Protestant or Socialist. This extraordinary system that kept alive the differences between the several groups prevented big conflicts and arguably

fulfilled in some ways the function of the British class system as identity-giving. It was not a very democratic system, for the country could only be ruled by a coalition of parties, the leaders of which made a compromise that they presented as the best possible result to their voters. The Catholics were probably the most united group, for they most strongly felt the need for emancipation. They were very loyal to the Pope, being a minority in their own country, and sent a great number of missionaries out to Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Frankly, the pillar system was based on scapegoating the other groups and thus conserving inner unity. After the second world war, however, scapegoating became more and more difficult. The pillars started tumbling, the system began disintegrating. One reason was the common experience of the war. Another was the introduction of television, on which every group could see the other group. A third was the feeling among Catholics that they had achieved their emancipation. Last but not least, there was the pressure of modern competitive society. Still many remnants of the system survive, but it is not uncommon now for a Catholic to vote for the Socialist party, to read a Liberal paper, to be a member of a Protestant broadcasting organisation, and to send his children to the school that is close to his home (for, after all, there is a lot of traffic and the roads can be dangerous). The Catholics, once more united than any other group, got great doubts about themselves, which were deepened by the Second Vatican Council, and the God-is-dead theology, while the sense of liberation at leaving the very stratified pillar system in general and the very stifling Catholic pillar in particular was great. The Catholics awoke, opened up and began adapting their Church to the new circumstances. The liturgy changed, new theologies and a new religious poetry emerged, a lot of groups and councils came into being, a new catechism was written in which a central role was given to human experience rather than to traditional authority. From 1968 to 1970 a pastoral council was held to deal with all the great issues. In its last meeting it asked the bishops to plead at the Vatican for the abolition of obligatory celibacy for priests.

Looking back, this last request, which was in the eyes of the Vatican a threat to the difference between clergy and laity, would seem almost certainly to have been the turning-point in relations with the Vatican. Six months later the bishops were ordered to stop the pastoral council; they were permitted to organise a pastoral consultation at the most. In December 1970 A. Simonis was made bishop. The profound humiliation of the Dutch Catholic Church had begun.

Already, in the sixties, it had become clear that breaking out of the old structures not only brought about a renewal of the Church but also set off a process of alienation from the Church and adoption of

the values of competitive society. It is one of the greatest disappointments of the men and women who were intensely involved in the forward-looking Church of the sixties that their activities did not in fact bring a great renewal of the Church, but that the youth in particular made use of their newly-gained freedom to abandon the Church and join competitive the society. The conservative backlash and the lack of any appreciation by the Vatican of what they tried to do made many despair. They, also, started leaving the Church, many priests quitted or fell ill, and many lay-people now say what members of my family often say to me: "We still believe in God and Christ, but we are not interested in the Church anymore".

In 1983 the number of registered Catholics dropped by 50,000, primarily because fewer children were baptized; the number of secular priests dropped from 2,611 to 2,533; 70 per cent of the female religious were retired, mostly because of age. The Dominican Order in Holland loses on average 12 brothers every year, mostly by death (and they are not always aged), while only one brother is joining on average every two years. Some religious orders in Holland have had no new members for 15 years or more. There are 5,589,482 Catholics, scattered through 1,782 parishes; they form 38.8 percent of the population. Of these 20 per cent go to church regularly (but the young are strikingly absent) and 300,000 Catholics spend at least one evening every week on some Church activity, which shows that although numbers may be falling participation and vitality are still great. This vitality is apparent in activities such as the interchurch peace movement, which was capable of twice bringing more than half a million people onto the streets of Amsterdam and the Hague in a demonstration against cruise missiles.

At first sight the Vatican seems to have had some success with its strategy. *The Dutch Catholics have become almost silent, the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life is slowly going up again, the conservatives are winning the day.* This fits in with the general trend in the Netherlands (and the world) of a growth of conservatism and fundamentalism. People, facing the chaos of the competitive society and discovering that at present the disadvantages of this society are greater than the advantages, turn back to the safety of the past. However, I am convinced that the past cannot be redeemed and restored. We cannot go back to the values and structures of the society and the Church before the French and industrial revolutions. But neither can we continue promoting a society in which competition and rivalry are the highest values, with the nuclear bomb wiping out all differences and all people.

I only have some vague ideas of what a new society would look like, but I see at this moment three paths that may lead to this new era. First of all, we should take the gospel seriously and abolish

