

I. The Church has never openly acknowledged the "wound"<sup>1</sup> of the "lamentable defection" in the light of the phenomenon of the children of the ordained; whether this was done knowingly or unknowingly, does it mark a historical stain on the Church from a pastoral point of view; if so, is the Church right to acknowledge this issue today, professionally and compassionately, as our present becomes tomorrow's ecclesial history?

We must take into account the historical reality as it presents itself to us, either in the form of documents or testimonies, and in order to decipher its nature, meaning, content, we must contextualise it, that is to say, put it into context. It is not the historian's task to make a value judgement, nor a moral judgement on the past whose data he is studying, but it is nevertheless practically impossible to arrive at absolute objectivity, since each of us is immersed in our own ambient culture, with its prejudices, its fashions, its currents of thought.

The Church, in the period prior to ours, like all the other institutions of our societies, carefully avoided publicly addressing anything that touched on the behaviour of its members, behaviour that it certainly disavowed, but on which it kept silent, surely out of shame and also out of fear of losing confidence.

It was a mistake, which can be explained by the context, but it remains a mistake. The current approach, strongly desired by Popes Benedict XVI and Francis, intends not only to break with previous silences, but also to denounce all forms of abuse, to the point of imposing "zero tolerance". If in the past the Church was able to adopt and follow the behaviour dictated by the surrounding culture, today it assumes a pioneering role that can inspire the behaviour of other institutions in our societies.

II. How has the Church dealt with the inevitable and very human characteristic of what Pope Saint Paul VI has called the "lamentable defection"<sup>2</sup> to date in history? Should this approach to "lamentable defection" be modified or amended in the light of the Vatican's guidelines on children of priests?

Upstream, the question of the formation of future priests has been a constant concern of the Church, especially during the 20th century, whose tragedies - two world wars - and social, cultural and spiritual changes have upset the characteristic features of our Western societies. As an example, the Constitution *Deus scientiarum Dominus* of Pius XI, published in 1931, introduced profound changes in the training of the clergy, making the norms that sanctioned the various stages of training much stricter and making the preparation of teachers more rigorous. Pius XII, too, paid great attention to this area, especially in the Apostolic Exhortation *Menti nostrae*, published in September 1950, in which he called for a revision of the methods of formation and for greater attention to the formation of priests on the human level.

The Second Vatican Council, by the Decree *Optatum totius*, of 28 October 1965, affirms that the whole of formation - spiritual, intellectual and disciplinary - should aim at forming pastors, ministers of the Word. The Conciliar Fathers

expressed their concern to form, above all, balanced and convinced personalities, especially in the life of prayer, including with the help of sound psychology and pedagogy, in order to develop in candidates for the priesthood a just use of freedom, a spirit of initiative and the ability to collaborate with their confreres and with the laity. In accordance with the principle of collegiality, the Council endorsed the request to entrust to the Episcopal Conferences alone the preparation of regulations for priestly formation, to be submitted to the Holy See for periodic review, so that the general laws may be adapted to the particular circumstances of time and place, so that priestly formation may always be in conformity with the pastoral needs of the regions where the ministry is to be carried out. The Conciliar Fathers also insisted that not only the ecclesiastics, but the entire Christian community should be involved in the work of awakening and caring for vocations, with families having a special responsibility, as well as Catholic parishes and associations. This same theme was taken up again at the Extraordinary Synod of 1967. After various study initiatives, it was decided to prepare a Ratio containing the fundamental principles on which the Episcopal Conferences could draw up their National Plans for Priestly Formation. The document of the Dicastery Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis was published on 6 January 1970 (and updated in 1985), and became an important instrument for promoting an authentic renewal of formation in seminaries. 25 years after the Council, the Synod of Bishops of 1990 marked another important step concerning the formation of priests in the present situation, as well as the following Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, published on 25 March 1992. This important statement also responds to the many expectations that emerged after the Council concerning the identity, spirituality and formation of priests, in order to ensure that the Church will be fervent ministers of the "new evangelisation", faithful servants of Christ and of mankind. It was in this direction that the Congregation for Catholic Education and Seminaries worked in the following years, in close collaboration with the Episcopal Conferences of the whole world.

The Church has therefore chosen to act upstream, so that the formation of future priests may prepare them to live their ministry in the generous service of the Christian communities entrusted to them. However, one undeniable reality must be taken into account: it is on the human and spiritual quality of each candidate for the priesthood, on his or her relationship with God and men, that the success of the institutional efforts made to ensure the best possible formation will depend.

III. The Mariological character of Catholicism is a character imbued with life. Is the historical and ecclesial ambivalence towards the children of the ordained and the religious (an attitude which has now partly changed thanks to the actions of Popes Francis and Benedict XVI), an internal theological contradiction in a Christocentric and pastoral perspective?

What is in question here is the fidelity, which is required of religious and priests, as it is of married people. Pope Francis often returns to one of the major

challenges of Christian life, the challenge of coherence between the professed faith, the commitments made in marriage or consecrated life, and concrete life. Avoiding as much as possible to address "the questions that hinder" is a human reaction that we all experience, one day or another, but which is often the fruit of an error of discernment. In this case, if there is a contradiction, it is the expression of an inconsistency between the free commitment of the whole person and of the whole life to the service of Christ and his Church, and a personal behaviour which consists in "taking back" what has been freely offered. This is obviously at the antipodes of the attitude of the Virgin Mary, who places herself totally at the disposal of her God, while not knowing where this will lead her. This is why she says: "May it happen to me according to your word!

IV. Does the Church act benevolently, in the manner of Joseph, in engaging in what is humanly difficult by examining this question for the first time in history, without compromising tradition?

Unquestionably, by committing itself to the path traced out by the Pope, the whole Church is responding to the mission entrusted to it by the Lord, which can be summed up by the mission entrusted by Jesus to Peter: "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep! »

When, for the first time in its two-thousand-year history, the Church examines this question, it is fulfilling its mission, which is not only a mission of charity, but also a mission of justice. Let us not forget that Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

V. The church knew that the children of the ordained are a living reality, and that even popes have had children; what has made it possible to deliberately ignore such clerical indiscretions until now, when such indiscretions have compromised a woman, a girl, the church and a child? In so doing, has not the church's attitude of neglect eroded the created and revealed goodness, all that is Mariological?

As I have said before, the church followed the way of all other institutions, which carefully avoided publicly revealing the serious faults of their members. I also repeat that this choice was guided by the conviction that scandal had to be avoided as much as possible and by the fear of seeing confidence in members of the clergy dwindling. Today, we agree with Pope Francis that this was certainly a mistake, given our current criteria based on truth and a certain requirement to communicate the truth. But the historian must take into consideration the facts of the past in their historical, cultural, sociological, etc. context and refrain from any anachronism. The choice made by Pope Francis opens up a new path; let us hope that it will also serve other institutions in our societies, which have not yet taken the path already travelled by the Catholic Church.

VI. "The Church has followed the path of all other institutions, which have carefully avoided publicly revealing the grave faults of their members. I also repeat that this choice was guided by the conviction that scandal should be avoided as much as

possible and by the fear of seeing confidence in the clergy diminish". Reflecting on these words, historically speaking, has this escape from scandal promulgated an even deeper scandal (by virtue of the fact that children suffered because they were silenced "Silentium"); in other words, looking back in the present context where safeguarding is paramount, has the church sometimes, historically speaking, been mistaken in considering the institutional scandal (public perception) as a more important concern than the scandal of silently hurting children?

In the light of the awareness that has taken place over the last few decades, two very important aspects need to be highlighted. The first is certainly the recognition that objectively the silence that has surrounded these children and their origin as well as both children and adults. The second aspect consists in recognising also that the silence was generalised and affected all institutions - religious and civil, many dioceses and numerous congregations regularly intervened to take care, at least materially, of these children, considering it just to bring economic help to the education of these children. This does not, alas, reflect anything to the suffering, but a real compassion on the part of the diocese or congregations which have wanted to help women and children in a particularly difficult situation.