

# Quo Vadis, Ecclesia Romana?

by Phil Brennan

There's a long history behind the current scandals rocking the Catholic Church in America, and it has little to do with sexual misconduct and everything to do with the subversion of the faith that has been under way for more than a century. Almost 103 years ago, Pope Leo XIII wrote a letter, *Testem Benevolentiae* (Witness to Good Will), to Baltimore's James Cardinal Gibbons, then one of the most-noted Catholic prelates in America. In that letter, the pope warned against what he called the "Americanization" of the Roman Catholic Church ... the watering down of authentic Catholic doctrine to suit the opinions and fashions of the time. The letter was provoked partly by a biography of a Catholic priest, the late Isaac Thomas Hecker, the founder of a religious order known popularly today as the Paulists.

Hecker, a convert to Catholicism, had a peculiar approach to the evangelization of Americans: He would bring Americans to Roman Catholicism by Americanizing the Roman Catholic faith to conform with American secularist ideals, morals and religious outlook, even when they conflicted with the doctrines that for 2,000 years have made the Catholic Church Catholic. His Paulist colleagues called him "the apostle of reconciliation of the Church with the age." He would help Americans to become Catholics "with no spiritual convulsions" (as the Paulists put it), without altering their ways or, substantially, their beliefs. He believed, it appears, that one could become a Roman Catholic with the option of accepting or rejecting the doctrines of the Catholic Church according to the person's whims and caprices. In short, he would convert his faith, rather than convert people.

## The 'Cafeteria Catholic'

Fr. Hecker's vision of the Catholic Church in America was of "a bustling, up-to-date business corporation," its priests, a staff of resourceful salesmen. "If we wish to attract Americans to the Church," he asserted, "we must present Catholicism to them as affirming in super-abundance those qualities of character which are distinctively American," according to an article in *The Point* in March 1958. "Individual initiative" became the angelic virtue in Paulist theology, replacing such apparently outmoded European virtues as humility, poverty and obedience. Likewise, any Catholic dogmas that Fr. Hecker deemed too severe for the American temperament he conveniently ignored, or else tamed through 'interpretation.' In so doing, he gave birth to that peculiar creature today known as the "cafeteria Catholic," those who pick and choose which doctrines or disciplines of the Church they choose either to embrace or denounce.

Tragically, his peculiar approach won the enthusiastic support of some of the most powerful, liberal American churchmen, including Bishop John Keane, rector of Catholic University; Archbishop John Ireland of Saint Paul, who had advocated sending all the Catholic children of America to public schools; and James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, dean of the American hierarchy and the cleric the pope addressed in his letter. All of these powerful members of the hierarchy were often found opposing the authority of the Vatican and questioning established Church doctrine. They, and others like them, hailed Fr. Hecker as their champion. "The ideal American priest," Archbishop Ireland called him, while Cardinal Gibbons appointed Fr. Hecker as his personal theologian at the Vatican Council (where Hecker was a leader of the forces opposed to the definition of papal infallibility).

Referring to Hecker's views, Pope Leo wrote:

The underlying principle of these new opinions is that, in order to more easily attract those who differ from her, the Church should shape her teachings more in accord with the spirit of the age and relax some of her ancient severity and make some concessions to new opinions. Many think that these concessions should be made not only in regard to ways of living, but even in regard to doctrines which belong to the deposit of the faith. They contend that it would be opportune, in order to gain those who differ from us, to omit certain points of her teaching which are of lesser importance, and to tone down the meaning which the Church has always attached to them.

It does not need many words, beloved son, to prove the falsity of these ideas if the nature and origin of the doctrine which the Church proposes are recalled to mind. The Vatican Council says concerning this point: "For the doctrine of faith which God has revealed has not been proposed, like a philosophical invention to be perfected by human ingenuity, but has been delivered as a divine deposit to the Spouse of Christ to be faithfully kept and infallibly declared. Hence that meaning of the sacred

dogmas is perpetually to be retained which our Holy Mother, the Church, has once declared, nor is that meaning ever to be departed from under the pretense or pretext of a deeper comprehension of them" (Constitution de Fide Catholica, Chapter iv).

Agree with that or not, it's clear that a hierarchy failing to defend Catholic doctrine or accept the discipline imposed by the faith would be ... well, heretical.

### **Catholic Political Correctness**

The scandals rocking the Church in America today had their roots in what might be called "Heckerism," the ideology that gave birth to political correctness in the Church – the doctrine that insists that if a tenet of theology gives offense to anyone it must be either toned down or abandoned. Pope Leo warned that "confounding of license with liberty, the passion for discussing and pouring contempt upon any possible subject, the assumed right to hold whatever opinions one pleases upon any subject and to set them forth in print to the world, have so wrapped minds in darkness that there is now a greater need of the Church's teaching office than ever before, lest people become unmindful both of conscience and of duty." This warning was ignored then, and now, 103 years later, we are witnessing the bitter fruit the failure to heed the pope's words have borne. Slowly, covertly, the cancer variously identified as Americanization or modernism, or simply as heresy, has eaten away at the vitals of the Catholic Church in America.

The Church in America that once stood like a rock in the sea of uncertainty, corruption and immorality that is modern secular society – the Church which could claim to be the staunch guardian of the immutable principles of Christianity handed down from the Apostles – has become an instrument of confusion and doubt, a betrayer of its faithful and a haven for the worst kinds of perversion and heresy. But, as I wrote last week, the Church has Christ's promise that He will be with it until the end of time. The Church in America will survive, but in order to do so it must hark back to Pope Leo's admonitions.

### **What We Must Do**

As Christ drove the money changers from the temple, we are going to have to drive the innovators and infiltrators and heretics out of the positions of authority they now occupy. Seminaries, some of which have become hotbeds of perversion and heresy, must be reformed. The scandal of homosexuality in the seminaries and elsewhere within the Church must be eliminated, and homosexuals must be denied admission to the seminaries and, when found to be practicing their perversion, thrown out of the priesthood.

Heretical doctrines which now abound must be condemned. Liturgical abuses which make a mockery of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass must be eliminated. Vatican directives concerning proper liturgical practices must be obeyed and implemented. Institutions which use the name Catholic must be made subject to the authority of the bishops in whose dioceses they operate. Those which prefer to adopt the moral relativisms of this corrupt age must be deprived of their Catholic identity and the faithful alerted to the fact.

Public figures who claim membership in the Church yet defy its most basic teachings must be denounced. Any politician who proclaims his or her Catholicity while supporting the atrocity of the wanton murder of the unborn must be excommunicated by his or her bishop without hesitation. The Church must also once again stand in the forefront of those who oppose this gruesome practice, condemning it with all its might. If we are to survive, we must become genuine Roman Catholics, fully in accord with the Magisterium. The struggle to take back our Church from those who have debased it, distorted its doctrines and abandoned its salvational disciplines must become the struggle of all Catholics.

It will be a long and arduous and often painful battle, but with His help – the help He promised – we will succeed in time. Pope Leo's warning in 1899 should have been heeded and the poison Hecker had loosed on the Church eliminated. The message of his letter, as *The Point* noted, "was unequivocal"; he left no room for doubt or dissent. *Civiltà Cattolica*, the Roman Jesuit journal, summarized *Testem Benevolentiae* in 1899:

The practical lesson which we must all draw from Leo XIII's Apostolic Letter is that Catholic principles do not change, whether through the passing of years, or the changing of countries, or new discoveries, or motives of utility. They are always the principles that Christ taught, that the Church made known, that Popes and Councils defended, that the Saints loved, that the Doctors demonstrated. As they are, they must be taken or left. Whoever accepts them in their fullness and

strictness is a Catholic; whoever hesitates, staggers, adapts himself to the times, makes compromises, may call himself by what name he will, but before God and the Church he is a rebel and a traitor.

Quo Vadis, Ecclesia Romana? That's up to us.

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