

## Catholic Church at end of an era

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No one who watched Pope John Paul II silently offering his Easter blessing to the Catholic faithful gathered in St. Peter's square could doubt that the frail pontiff was nearing the end of his life. When he dies, he will leave behind him a church that has undergone changes that were unimaginable when he was first ordained a priest in Krakow, Poland, on Nov. 1, 1946.

In 1946, the dominant model for Catholic faith and life had been set by the Council of Trent in the 16th century. Masses were celebrated in Latin throughout the Catholic world. Whether in Brooklyn or Bombay, the mass began with the sign of the cross and the words of the priest, "Introibo ad altare dei."

Catholics in those days were expected to show up for confession on Saturday afternoon in order to guarantee they were in a state of grace before receiving communion on Sunday. Nor did liturgical prayer get in the way of private intercessions. There was plenty of quiet time during the mass for parishioners to offer prayers for the repose of the souls of long dead, but not forgotten, friends.

Most of the theological heavy lifting was done by clergy, many of them in religious orders. Sometimes the disagreements among them over disputed questions were fierce and the rivalries intense. But there was a sense -- perhaps, in retrospect, too complacent -- that the game was at least being played on a field where the boundary markers were clear to all.

Changes, however, were already under way. Catholic biblical scholars had embraced the historical-critical method of studying the Bible first developed by Protestant scholars, while Catholic historians and theologians cultivated a renewed interest in the writings of the early church fathers.

When Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council in 1962 with the aim, as he put it, of letting "a little fresh air into the church," Catholic biblical and early Christian studies had already paved the way for the council to consider alternative models for talking about the church's nature and mission.

From the standpoint of ordinary parishioners, the changes in the liturgy introduced by Vatican II made the greatest initial impact. Mass was now said in the vernacular and the priest stood behind the altar, facing the people. Hymns, some of them borrowed from Protestants, assumed a new importance in Catholic worship, while guitars blossomed like mushrooms after a spring rain.

In this new world, lay people assumed a greater responsibility for writing Catholic theology, especially as the numbers of clergy declined. Theological diversity, never absent, became more pronounced. Catholics found themselves specifying not only that John Smith was a Catholic theologian, but also adding, somewhat sheepishly, exactly what kind of a Catholic theologian John Smith was.

Since 1978, John Paul II has guided this great lumbering behemoth of a church. The problem for him as for any pope was how to maintain the unity of the Roman Catholic Church -- the most impressive in Christendom -- without imposing a uniformity that would stifle its equally impressive diversity. The best sign to an outsider that he may have discharged this duty well is the fact that some disgruntled Catholics complain he was always too strict, while others bemoan his incredible laxity.

With the end of his pontificate in sight, non-Catholics are left with several strong impressions of the man. One is, of course, as a constant traveler. His many trips throughout the world called dramatic attention to the worldwide spread of Christianity over the last century and the shift of the center of gravity in Christendom southward. The increase of Christians in Africa from 10 million in 1900 to roughly 400 million today illustrates a new reality with which all churches must come to terms.

But his strongest image may be as a moral theologian, who advocated a consistent "culture of life" that opposes war, the death penalty, euthanasia and abortion. He has illustrated his commitment to life in his own unwillingness to concede anything to death, battling the infirmities of old age and the ravages of Parkinson's disease with an astonishing force of will.

John Paul II will be satisfied if, in the never-ending clash between life and death, men and women of good will decide it is better in the specific case before them to err on the side of life.

That decision is all the monument he wants.

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