

WORLD | TRANSITION IN THE VATICAN: CRISIS OF THE FAITH

Europeans Fast Falling Away From Church

By **ELAINE SCIOLINO** APRIL 19, 2005

PARIS, April 18 - To understand the crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, visit the Seminary of St. Sulpice in Issy-Les-Moulineaux outside Paris.

The vast 100-year-old structure, built on the ruins of a 17th-century chateau, contains vaulted ceilings, stained-glass windows and hundreds of rooms. Pope John Paul II visited here in 1980 on a trip in which he chastised the French for abandoning the church.

But the seminary's corridors are dark, the individual living quarters largely empty. Only 52 seminarians are studying this year, a decrease of 50 percent from a decade ago. Many of them come from as far away as Vietnam and Rwanda.

"We could welcome more than 200 seminarians if they wanted to come," said the Rev. Jean-Luc Védrine, the 45-year-old superior. "Today there are young people in France who have never seen a priest."

Indeed, in all of France last year, only 90 priests were ordained, compared with 566 in 1966. More and more throughout Europe, priests are being forced to cover several parishes.

The Rev. Pascal Le Roux, for example, the 41-year-old pastor of the Notre-

Dame Cathedral in Evreux in Normandy, must minister to two other area churches. Two dozen more under his authority have no priest and remain closed except for a few holidays and special occasions.

The shortage of priests is only one of the problems bedeviling the Catholic Church in Europe. The urgent need to revitalize it is cited as a major reason why the world's cardinals who opened their conclave in Rome on Monday to elect a new pope may choose a European.

During his 26-year papacy, John Paul II used the force of his personality in dozens of trips around the Continent to try to bring back European Catholics who had fallen away.

It was a disappointing exercise.

Among Catholics, only 10 percent in the Netherlands, 12 percent in France, 15 percent in Germany and Austria, 18 percent in Spain and 25 percent in Italy attend Mass weekly.

Granted, historical, demographic and cultural differences mean that the reasons vary from country to country. But in terms of an overall sense of spirituality on the Continent, there is a troubling trend.

Only 21 percent of Europeans say that religion is "very important" to them, according to the often-cited European Values Study, conducted in 1999 and 2000 and published two years ago. A similar survey in the United States by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life put the number at nearly 60 percent.

The trend away from regular participation has been so noticeable that it has even been given a name: European apostasy.

"European Catholics are not against the Catholic Church," said Ulrich Ruh, editor of the Catholic monthly Herder-Korrespondenz, based in Freiburg, Germany. "They go to church at least once or twice a year and bring their children to be baptized and confirmed. Rather, they have made their own personal arrangements with the church and do not want to be disturbed. They do not want to be evangelized. That is why the pope failed to make the church more attractive."

Part of the problem is the church's emphasis on punishment and sin rather than on inclusion and community.

On the trip to France in 1980, early in his tenure, for example, Pope John Paul referred to the country by its historic title and asked, "Eldest daughter of the church, what have you done with your baptism?"

That approach, which some here dismiss as paternalistic, alienates many of Europe's Catholics, who insist that it is the church's leaders -- not the faithful -- who must change.

"They still think they have the truth and that their truth must be imposed on everyone," said Didier Vanhoutte, former president of the Fédération des Réseaux du Parvis, an umbrella organization of 41 Catholic reform movements across Europe. "They haven't accepted the limits of their power. They have to get closer to the people by accepting a certain degree of poverty and, certainly, humility."

More than their American counterparts, Europe's Catholics disregard the church's teachings on an array of moral and sexual issues, including abortion, embryonic stem cell research, in vitro fertilization, sex outside marriage and homosexuality.

The Netherlands allows same-sex marriage and several other countries -- including France, Denmark, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and Finland -- offer some sort of same-sex de facto marital contract. Some countries -- including Spain, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Denmark -- have liberalized euthanasia laws.

The trend away from organized Catholicism is sharpest among European youth. In Spain, a poll of university students by the BBVA Foundation in March indicated that of the institutions playing a prominent role in Spanish life, the Catholic Church inspired the least amount of confidence. Only 45 percent consider themselves Catholic, compared with 80 percent of Spain's population as a whole.

Today, the poll concluded, most university students "disagree with the statement that, 'The teachings of the Catholic Church help us to live more morally.'"

John Paul was particularly distressed by moves by Spain's Socialist government that he perceived as anti-church, including campaigns to liberalize divorce and abortion laws and to legalize gay marriage and stem cell research. In remarks to Spanish clerics visiting him in the Vatican in January, the pope suggested that the Spanish government was spreading a "secular outlook."

"New generations of Spaniards are growing up influenced by religious indifference and by ignorance of the Christian tradition with its rich spiritual heritage," the pope said, demanding that the government give religious instruction in public schools to students who want it.

Defense Minister José Bono, although a conservative Catholic himself, shot back that the attack was "an exaggeration and a mistake."

Certainly, secularism, particularly in the separation of church and state, is strictly enforced in many countries in Europe.

In 2004, the campaign by some European governments, supported by the pope, to include a reference to Europe's Christian heritage in the draft European Union constitution failed.

Later last year, Rocco Buttiglione, a former Italian minister, was rejected for a top post in the European Union for his opinions that homosexuality is a sin and that women would be better off at home.

In 2002, the European Union adopted a report urging its members to ensure access to contraception, a move that Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family denounced as "a dark and sad moment for this great Europe."

There is growth in Christianity on the Continent, but it tends to be among immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America, who are often drawn to churches described as evangelical, Pentecostal or charismatic.

At 7 a.m. six days a week, a windowless basement of an office building in a working class part of Paris is filled with Filipino men and women, most of them domestic workers. They have come to celebrate a charismatic -- but not Catholic -- mass with a Filipino priest, the Rev. John Donn Bautista, who is married and the father of six children.

The room -- furnished with an altar and plastic stools as well as computers, a fax machine and file cabinets -- does double duty as a chapel and the church headquarters.

The trend toward churches like these frustrates and even angers many traditional Catholic clerics. "We're seeing the super-marketing of religion," said the Rev. Jacques Anelli, director of the National Vocation Service of the French Catholic Church. "People consume, and when they don't find an institution they agree with, then they go somewhere else. Bad variations must not make us abandon what we are. The relationship with God must not be done like petty commerce."

But for Catholics who want more, this sort of church is a welcome haven. "When I came to France, I wanted a church that gave me a sense of belonging, a sense of security," said Cory de Jesus, a 45-year-old housekeeper from the Philippines who plays the drums and sings at the church's Sunday mass in a larger hall. "I have a sense of the sacraments here that I didn't get as a Roman Catholic."

Hélène Fouquet contributed reporting from Paris for this article, and Renwick McLean from Madrid.

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