

The Faithful and Secularism, Part Two

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What are we to expect when the spirit of piety and the sanctifying life grow weak; when the spirit of prayer is neglected and reduced to the mere performance of rituals; when the life of prayer is replaced by work and organizations; when the spiritual dimension is neglected; when the faithful lose the sense of sin and forget repentance; and consequently, when the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith disappears—or is made to disappear?

Then the Church becomes an institution of this age and loses the very essence of her existence. At best, she is transformed into a humanitarian institution, perhaps even one of high caliber, but she loses her mission of sanctifying man, raising him up to the Kingdom of God, and thus bringing him to salvation.

One of the dangers of secularism is that it changes the mind without coercion. It confines the mind's thinking to what is sensible and tangible, causing the household of God—the children of the Church—to rush into following the ways and methods of the people of this age, even in ecclesial ministries. Thus, you see them pursuing dazzling achievements at the expense of the human person. They give priority, in their planning, to establishing institutions and ensuring their survival, with the aim of serving man; yet they neglect serving the very man they intend to serve until construction of the institution is completed. Then they discover that the institution itself requires constant development and support, exhausting the efforts of those responsible for it. And so the poor, the wounded, the suffering, the despairing, and the grieving remain forgotten. Where, then, is living and active love embodied?

They may also seek to modernize pastoral and spiritual ministry by following the methods of this age: planning, calculations, and endless meetings. God is forgotten, and souls no longer hope for His blessing upon the ministry they seek to offer. At that point, the work becomes entirely a human endeavor, while those carrying it out remain convinced that they are serving God. The spiritual dimension may disappear without anyone noticing, and the Church becomes a “sector” that may be called “spiritual,” but only alongside a number of other sectors that human beings need. What remains of her essence if she becomes like the rest, and is no longer the one who directs, gives meaning to, and grants life? Indeed, when she loses the essence of her existence and imitates the other sectors, she appears

either feeble or artificial, and she loses her precedence before other worldly institutions and organizations, which may surpass her in reaching the intended goal because they are more specialized and professional.

In his book *For the Life of the World*, Father Alexander Schmemmann says: “The Church is in the world but not of the world. Only because she is not of the world can she reveal the ‘world to come,’ that which transcends the world.” What truly remains of her if she loses this role? Activism prevails and prepares the way for fundamentalism to arise as a reaction to the loss of purpose.

When activism overwhelms the Church—that is, when pastoral activities or practical witness dominate while the spirit of prayer and repentance recedes—the balance is disturbed, and the scales tip toward resembling the fallen world. Activities then become the goal in themselves. Conversely, when the Church removes active pastoral care from her ministry, isolates herself from this world in her thought and service, cuts herself off from it, and contents herself with preserving the right faith apart from Christian love in imitation of Christ—when she does not strive unceasingly to embrace the world and seek its salvation—then she falls into fundamentalism. In truth, both secularism and fundamentalism are forms of alienation from the spirit of the Gospel and a terrible betrayal of true Christianity.

I will take an example from the Catholic Church, since she confronted contemporary secularism and modernity before others in Western Europe. In the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, despite all its positive aspects, the Catholic Church fell into a very powerful movement of activism. The Italian Jesuit Father Giovanni Martinetti described her condition in prophetic words in his book *Ragioni per credere oggi*:

“The post-conciliar Church lost her mystical face, and became the Church of constant dialogue, organizations, consultations, conferences, councils, committees, academies, parties, pressure groups influencing public opinion, functions, structures and restructuring, social experiments, and statistics. Thus the Church became, more than ever before, the Church of men—that is, an entity without identity.”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, in the final years of her life, to the astonishment of the volunteers in her humanitarian works, ordered the closure of all the bank accounts

of the international body that supported the works of her charitable religious order, and the cancellation of the meetings of the international group that supported her humanitarian activities, when she learned how enormous the expenses of those meetings had become!

Those in whom the Spirit of God acts shock the world by their attitudes and conduct. But what kind of Christianity is it that goes along with the world and its sins, instead of awakening it from its heedlessness and deviation?

There is a great difference between caring for humanity, accompanying it, and sharing in its pain in order to raise it from that pain toward salvation, and accepting its sin. The Christian loves the sick person, not the sickness. The Christian comes from eternal life, not from secular life; meaning, he illumines earthly life with the light of eternity. He does not reduce his life, its needs, and its goal to the limited years he spends upon this earth.

Therefore, the mission of the Church lies in raising the world with her to where it once was and to what it once was; in reminding the world of the life to which God has called it—not only by preaching, but in practice; and in manifesting the action and truth of God’s Incarnation in human history by embodying His presence in the heart of the world in which she lives.

If God’s action and fruit are not visible in the life and service of Christians, do they not become a secular social organization, depriving the world of the transfiguration to which it is called?

When the Church, in her ministry, does not make room for the hesychastic life—or what is today called spirituality—and directs nearly all her concern and energy toward action, she becomes secularized. That is, she loses her connection to the heavenly Kingdom, by which she is called to transform the earthly world, through its transfiguration in her authentic work, which must be done by the inspiration, presence, and action of the Holy Spirit.

The secularization of the Church deprives human beings of the grace of truly becoming children of God, not merely in word. They then search for the meaning of their lives in other places, and the word of the prophet Jeremiah becomes true of them: “They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out for themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water” (2:13).

I will give two examples.

- Is it not possible for ecclesial media, when placed in the hands of those who are not prayerful and spiritually watchful, to become a means of displaying achievements and boasting about them, rather than urging viewers or readers to cultivate the spirit of love, service, and giving?
- And is it not possible for the goal of “pastoral” activities to shift toward fundraising, instead of being a practical means of supporting the faithful spiritually, helping them experience joy in the midst of the community, solidarity among the brethren, growth in the life of virtue, and the living out of love with greater effectiveness?

These are some of the deviations we can easily fall into without even noticing. To the extent that the life of prayer—and I emphasize the word *life*—grows within us, the children of the Church, we become more aware and vigilant so as not to lose sight of the goal, and the influence of worldliness weakens within us, and we truly become the Church of Christ.

(To be continued)