

## SHIFTING PARADIGMS: THE SYNOD OF 2012

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**Abstract:** *In what turned out to be the final half year of his Pontificate Pope Benedict presided over a Synod intended to focus on modern secularism and the ensuing abandonment of religious practice by so many traditionally Catholic people. The preparation of the Synod and its initial stages followed the familiar pessimistic approach: blaming modernity for hedonism and materialism and for destroying spiritual values. Unexpectedly, the very last ten days of the Synod were marked by a renewed interest in Vatican II, a missionary openness to the positive values of the contemporary world marked not so much by secularism as by individualization. The media had already turned off the Synod as a non-event, and as a consequence missed the remarkable shift of paradigm.*

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**Key Words:** Synod, secularism, paradigmatic shift, new evangelisation.

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**T**he Synod of October 2012 came and went. Although the main topic “New Evangelisation” could have been exciting in times of decreasing Church practice in so many countries, expectations were low. The media, even *The Tablet*, paid little attention. The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the appearance of Pope Francis on the world scene have made us nearly forget there ever was a Synod at all. This article intends to draw the attention to the journalistic oversight of something that could be of importance for the interpretation of the post-synodal document we may be receiving soon and of the pastoral options of Pope Francis.

*The Tablet* of 9 July 2011<sup>1</sup> tells of a debate organised by *The Spectator* on the motion that secularism is a bigger threat to Christianity than Islam. No wonder the debate became heated. Before the debate 137 agreed with the motion, 67 disagreed, 92 did not know. From the moment someone drew the attention to the violence-prone currents in present-day Islam, and the persecutions of Christians in some Muslim countries, it was no longer a choice between ideologies. Those speaking for the motion, among whom was Timothy Radcliffe OP, were in a no-win situation. After the debate only 108 still agreed, 167 disagreed and 8 did not know. We may worry where our world is going if religious practice continues to decline, but that is not the sort of fear we feel when we are shown the results of yet another suicide bomb in Bagdad. All the same, “secularism” is something to worry about.

### A STRIKING CASE

In 1960, 45.2% of the children born in the Netherlands were baptised in the Catholic Church. Twenty-five years later this had dropped to 28.1%. After another twenty-five

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tablet: The International Catholic News Weekly* (9 July 2011): 17.

years the figure has halved again to 13.5%. During the final twenty years of last century the number of Catholic people in Holland that regularly attended weekend services dropped by about 60% (from 1,227,100 in 1980 to 496,800 in 1998). Ten years later the figure had dropped further to 288,100. In 1965 the Catholic Church in The Netherlands could rely on 3,857 priests (secular or religious) for the parish ministry. In 1985 the figure had dropped to 1,804. By the end of the century it had gone down to 1,394 and in 2009 to 652.<sup>2</sup> Since then the decline has continued on all counts.

In the 1960s the changes taking place in The Netherlands drew world attention.<sup>3</sup> The Dutch had the reputation of being a solidly religious people, either Catholic or Protestant. It supplied numerous missionaries to emerging Churches. What had gone wrong? First, how did the Dutch themselves see it? Jan Hulshof describes five reactions.<sup>4</sup> By way of scapegoating several groups are chased into the desert: the media, the Catholic schools, the hierarchy and especially theologians and progressive priests. Social researchers found it necessary to refute in an in-depth analysis the claim that an intellectual elite had betrayed the common faithful.<sup>5</sup> A second reaction Hulshof calls the "ostriches", who look at the sunny side of things. People may practise less but they are more committed. Their choices in life are more conscious and personal, less routine, freer from social pressure. Anyway, the clouds of today will blow away tomorrow. As a third group he notices the dreamers, who still float on the glories of an idealised past, on the successes of the Church in former mission countries, on a future flourishing on the possibilities of a culture based on personal choice and individual freedom. As a fourth reaction he sees a lot of caricaturising in all directions: permissivity, individualisation, narcissism and hedonism. The fifth group Hulshof identifies are those who go underground, take their distance from the real Church, observe but stay aside.

We could add the sympathisers of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who blamed the Vatican Council, and people attached to traditional liturgy pointed to the liturgical innovations coming from the Council, not to forget pessimistic moralisers who diagnosed a decline of western civilization and a sinful rejection of God. Most people simply spoke of "secularisation" or, with a twist, "secularism."

## NOT SO EXCEPTIONAL AFTER ALL

When happenings on the shores of the North Sea first caught international headlines with amusing anecdotes of over-eager liturgical innovators, the world shrugged it off as a curious case of "Dutch disease." The surrounding countries felt immune and looked down on it with feelings of superiority. Half a century later the condescending smiles have vanished. Church membership and Mass attendance have drastically dropped, not only everywhere in Europe but also in Australia and New Zealand, in fact in nearly all so-called

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<sup>2</sup> Gerard Dekker, Joep de Hart & Jan Peters, *God in Nederland 1966-1996* (Amsterdam: Anthos, 1997). Jan Hulshof, "De Nederlandse katholieken in de jaren tachtig" in Jan Hulshof (ed.), *Op grond van vertrouwen: De r.k. kerk in Nederland op de drempel van de 21ste eeuw* (Baarn: Arbor, 1991), 34-38. Figures are from the regular publications of KASKI, Research Centre for Religion and Society, attached to Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands, [www.ru.nl/kaski](http://www.ru.nl/kaski).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *Paris Match*, 17 December 1966 & 14 January 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Hulshof, "De Nederlandse Katholieken", 53-59. As theological secretary to the Dutch Bishops Conference Dr. Jan Hulshof stood in the eye of the storm.

<sup>5</sup> Ed Simons & Lodewijk Winkeler, *Het verraad der clerken* (Baarn: Arbor, 1987).

western countries (except perhaps the USA). The numbers of priests have dwindled to the point that many parishes are now without a priest and are being merged into ever greater clusters. It once happened that, when a group of Bishops was discussing the shortage of priests, another one joined the discussion with the remark he was more worried about the shortage of faithful. In many Protestant Churches, especially the mainstream Churches, something similar has taken place but their situation is too complex to be considered in this article.

As one would expect, reactions world-wide do not differ notably from the way Dutch Catholics reacted in the 1970s and 1980s. The blame is laid according to one's own perspective. Liberally oriented people blame the conservative leadership which in turn has occupied the moral high ground as Archbishop Fisichella, responsible for "New Evangelisation" in the Vatican, did when he described Catholics who have drifted away from the Church as people who have "an attitude of indifference, arrogance or detachment."<sup>6</sup> Secularisation and secularism remain the predominant terms, useful insofar as they refer not only to the fact of people drifting away from the Church but at the same time suggest an explanation of why they do so, namely a process of turning away from the spiritual to the secular, from permanent meaning and values to the *saeculum* of immediate satisfaction, losing interest in "matters of ultimate concern", to use the well-known phrase of Tillich. There seems to be a near consensus that the decline of religious practice and of vocations is linked to this sort of secularism.

## BUT IS IT?

*The Tablet* recently picked up an amusing contrast that should put us on our guard.<sup>7</sup> It quoted two senior clerics in England developing the theme of secularism. For Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor secularism means losing sight of the question "To what end?" Unparalleled knowledge of what is, leads to unprecedented doubts of what ought to be. His successor, Vincent Nichols, on the contrary, does not identify the present age with aggressive secularism. He sees widespread and deep sympathy and search for the transcendent. Fortunately, we do not have to play the referee between the two prelates but the fact that such contrasting views occur at all should warn us that the indiscriminate use of words like secularisation and secularism may not be the only or the best way to approach the issue.

Official Church discourse has pointed the way by introducing terms like "mission" and "evangelisation." Introducing is perhaps not the right word. Already in the 1940s somebody tried to rally French Catholics by calling France a mission country, *pays de mission*, even though, when some people took it seriously and engaged in a *mission de France*, they were whistled back. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Paul VI (1975) picked up the thread by making a distinction between "secularisation" and "secularism", the first being what he called "the just and legitimate effort" to discover and master the autonomous laws of nature and to develop the legitimate autonomy of the sciences and human cultures. "Secularism" he restricted to man-centred, systematic and

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<sup>6</sup> *The Tablet* (11 February 2012): 18.

<sup>7</sup> *The Tablet* (19 May 2012): 31.

militant atheism (n. 55). To all these worlds, says Paul VI, the redeeming powers of the Gospel can and must be directed in what he calls a “missionary proclamation” (n. 53).<sup>8</sup>

Having adopted words like mission and evangelisation, current Church talk, unlike Paul VI, often does not seem to know what further use to make of them. For Paul VI, inspired by the presence and the contributions of numerous missionary bishops in the Synod on Evangelisation (1973), there was a continuity between mission to those far off, and to those across the street. Not only in lands far away missionaries should begin with looking for the *semina verbi*. “In this same modern world ... one cannot deny the existence of real stepping-stones to Christianity and of evangelical values, at least in the form of a sense of emptiness and nostalgia” (n. 55). Is that somehow what Archbishop Vincent Nichols wanted to say as well?

## MISSION?

In the last two centuries the Catholic faith has spread into Africa, Oceania and important parts of Asia. Religious orders have built vast reserves of missionary experience. Possibly the most crucial step in mission history has been the fruitful adoption of the human sciences, especially social and cultural anthropology. As anthropologists and missionaries outgrew their mutual distrust, “culture” as an empirical category helped missionaries to look differently at the world in which they were engaged and missionary work shifted into high gear. For untold numbers of missionaries the adoption of “culture” in missionary thinking was a liberating discovery. They had been brought up to see “otherness” as odd or erroneous ways of thinking if not moral deviations. The paradigm of “other cultures” changed that. “Otherness” was no longer something to be overcome but a richness to be respected, a treasure trove full of the Seeds of the Word. Not to be confused with a romantic denial of human sinfulness, the adoption of “culture” was a recognition that in principle all cultures are entitled to equal respect, that all cultures are a concoction of good and evil, and that all need, constantly and equally, the healing and ennobling power of the Gospel (*gratia sanans et elevans*).<sup>9</sup>

The introduction of “culture” as a core missiological paradigm has meant a basic change in missionary thinking and praxis, not only for the missionaries but also for the people they work with. When hearers of the missionary message understand that missionaries accept and respect what is at the heart of their identity, they open up. Disarmed and no longer on the defensive they are more ready to listen and to accept the mending power and the enriching source of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup>

However, as the Church woke up to the need of a missionary outreach into the modern world, the continuity that Paul VI saw between mission far off and that across the

<sup>8</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Nuntiandi”*, (Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1972). See Jan Snijders, “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*: the Movement of Minds” in *The Clergy Review*, 62 (1977): 170-5.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, Theologians* (Collegeville, Min.: Liturgical Press, 2010), 1-19; 166-88; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 100–22; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Mensen als Verhaal van God* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1989), 59-63.

<sup>10</sup> L.J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures, New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Gerard Hall SM, “Approaches to Mission” in Alois Greiler SM (ed) *Catholic Beginnings in Oceania* (Hindmarsh: ATF, 2009), 207-12. An example of the change: Phil Gibbs, “Indigenous Spirituality” in Gerard Hall (ed), *Dreaming a New Earth*, (Preston: Mosaic Press, 2012), 54-7.

street, has vanished. We hear nobody asking how our missionaries managed to succeed in their missionary work! Nobody takes another look at Francis Xavier in Japan or Peter Chanel in Polynesia. Missionaries and missiologists have been strangely absent from the debate on secularism. Was there nothing to learn from the Missionaries of Africa and the many other missionary Orders?

## A SYNOD!

It was at this particular point in history that Benedict XVI took an initiative that looked like a turning point. He put *New Evangelisation* at the top of the agenda. He created a Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation and devoted the 2012 Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to the *New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, “primarily addressed to those who have drifted from the Church in traditionally Christian countries” (preface of the *Lineamenta*).

The Pope’s wording suggested that the focus would entirely be upon the dramatic drop in religious practice in the last fifty years, but the first outline of the Synod’s agenda, the so-called *Lineamenta*, published on 2 February 2011, did not bear this out.<sup>11</sup> According to the Introduction it was the Special Assembly of the Bishops of the Middle East that put New Evangelisation on the Synod’s agenda, a part of the world we associate more with religious fanaticism than with religious indifference (n. 1). The text does speak repeatedly of “expansive, penetrating changes in present-day society” (nn. 2, 3) but the general picture is rather that of a revitalisation of the Church, everywhere and in all aspects (n. 5) in reaction to the whole gamut of problems that beset the world today, secularism as well as social problems like migration, corruption, globalisation, and so on (n. 6). In the perspective of the *Lineamenta* the Synod will address an alleged general state of fatigue in the Church itself (n. 15), rather than something happening in the world around. It is said not to aim at any specific problem but to be an exercise in “evaluating every area and activity in the Church” (cf questions after n. 22).

In the footsteps of John Paul II the *Lineamenta* prefer to see continuity between pastoral care and missionary outreach, with the disadvantage of blurring the specific question of “secularism” and how the Church should address it (n. 10). The *Lineamenta* stress the need for what they call “Transmitting the Faith” in the sense of transmitting knowledge of the contents of the faith and the importance of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in this regard, but overlook the fact that most people have a problem, not so much with what to believe, but with believing itself (nn. 11, 19).

Where the *Lineamenta* mention the “secularised” way of looking at life, they shift into the moralising mode: “temptations of superficiality and self-centredness arising from a predominating hedonistic and consumer-oriented mentality” (n. 6). No hint of connecting up with two centuries of vast and successful missionary experience.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20070427\\_lineamenta](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20070427_lineamenta). Accessed 31 december 2012. Figures in brackets in the text refer to numbers in the document.

## THE WORKING DOCUMENT

The prospective members of the Synod were invited to react to the *Lineamenta* and, as is said in the Introduction, with the help of their observations and comments a working document or so-called *Instrumentum Laboris* was composed to serve as the agenda for the Synod. This *Instrumentum* was published on 27 May 2012.<sup>12</sup>

If we lay the *Instrumentum* alongside the *Lineamenta* we can prudently conclude that several members of the coming Synod must have remarked on the failure of the *Lineamenta* to bring to a focus what it now calls wide-spread de-Christianisation (n. 12). We now read that the New Evangelisation is primarily directed at people who have drifted from the Church and Christian practice (preface). We hear of social and cultural changes that affect people's perceptions of self and of the world, and consequently their way of believing in God (n. 6). The text expresses regret for the weakening of the faith in countries where, for centuries, the Christian faith has contributed to the shaping of culture and society (n. 7) and it calls for a process of discernment to find ways of responding to this situation (n. 16). In other words, the respondents wanted a sharper focus.

The first chapter, *Jesus Christ, the Good News of God to Humanity*, reads like an *opusculum* apart (nn. 18-40): a fine meditation on evangelising as a source of spiritual deepening of one's own faith and commitment. It may well be a text of Pope Benedict himself.

In the second chapter, *Time for a New Evangelisation*, (nn. 41-89) the redactor confirms the impression given in the Introduction that in at least some quarters there is a firm desire to get to grips with the massive drop in Church participation. Some respondents have made good points in identifying the origins and causes of the decline and, quoting from a note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of 2007, the New Evangelisation gets a clear definition as "outreach to those who no longer practise the Christian faith" (n. 85).

Some responses must have been quite outspoken. Noteworthy is the mention of active lay participation to stir up the communities (n. 84, cf. n. 109), more and more indispensable, it says, as the numbers of priests go down. The same applies to ecumenical relations and progress which the *Instrumentum* says has been repeatedly emphasised (n. 72). But, would everyone also agree with the reduction of ecumenism to an inner, spiritual change of heart, as the text does? Admittedly, several speakers are quoted for saying that the absence of effective ecumenical progress in recent decennia undermines the credibility of the Churches, just as Vatican II documents already said (n. 125).<sup>13</sup>

Though rich in valuable insights the third chapter, *Transmitting the Faith*, slips back into moralising and sees the modern world to be full of "obstacles that make it difficult and perilous to live and transmit the faith, namely consumerism and hedonism, cultural nihilism and a closure on transcendence which extinguishes any need for salvation" (n. 95). At times the *Instrumentum* seems to lose contact with reality as where it grows lyrical

<sup>12</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20120619\\_instrumentum-xiii](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20120619_instrumentum-xiii). Accessed 31 December 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Referring to *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1

on the evangelising possibilities of parishes, overlooking that in many countries parishes are each year merged into ever larger clusters of an ever more administrative character and weaker pastoral, let alone missionary, relevance (n. 107).

The fourth and last chapter reveals in its title, *Reviving Pastoral Activity*, a return to the view that “New Evangelisation” means a general renewal of pastoral zeal and enthusiasm in a world in which the “Christian experience” is seen to be weakening. The drop in vocations to the priesthood gets a special mention but only as the most visible sign of this weakening (n. 160). The situation asks for nothing special, nothing different from what has always been done (n. 140). It “means to rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and to allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul who cried out: Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (n. 165).<sup>14</sup> In other words, new evangelisation is not in the first place a new communication, not a reaching out *ad extra*, but an inner renewal. Important, but not what we usually call Mission.

## THE SYNOD

The Synod opened on 7 October 2012<sup>15</sup> and the General Relator, Cardinal Wuerl of Washington, started with an exposé intended to give focus to the proceedings as he put it. Like the *Lineamenta* and the *Instrumentum Laboris* the Cardinal wants the Synod to address what he obviously sees as a general decline of the western world. The roots of this decline he finds in the upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s, marked by a “hermeneutic of discontinuity” within the centres of learning, and reflected in aberrational liturgical practice. The Christian vision has faded, the message has become stale. Modern culture is characterised by secularism, materialism and individualism or, quoting Benedict XVI, an “eclipse of the sense of God.” The New Evangelisation will point to the very origins of human dignity, the theological understanding of the true identity of Christ, it must reawaken the natural desire that all people have for the Transcendent and foster recognition that it is only in Christ we can understand what it means to be human (n. 17). Fortunately, adds the Cardinal, the New Evangelisation has started already, especially through numerous Ecclesial Movements among whom Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei and the Neocatechumenal Way are mentioned by name (n. 22). Evidently, the massive decline in Church practice and in vocations to the priesthood and religious life in western countries have become more important to those guiding the Synod, but the underlying paradigm has not changed.

Future historians will be puzzled. In one lifetime a religious change of tectonic proportions has taken place affecting most traditional Christian countries. Tens, if not hundreds of millions of people with a Catholic (or Protestant) background, have abandoned the practice of their Faith. Countries that only two generations ago sent out hundreds of missionaries can no longer assure a minimum of priestly and pastoral care at home to the small flock of parishioners still going to church. But in the Synod’s planning the crisis plays a relatively minor role!

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<sup>14</sup> Cf John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 40.

<sup>15</sup> [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/bollettino\\_25\\_xiii](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/bollettino_25_xiii)

Future anthropologists reading the *Lineamenta*, the *Instrumentum Laboris* and the opening *Relatio* could be tempted to speak of “denial”: the natural reaction of a traditional society unable to cope with a new world. Some may be tempted to see the negative judgments on modernity as a form of culture shock.

## A BREAKTHROUGH ?

On 17 October, Cardinal Wuerl presented the Synod with fourteen questions for the working groups of the next days. The input from the speakers must have been very forceful indeed to bring about what feels like a sea-change from the *Lineamenta*, the *Instrumentum Laboris* and his own opening *Relatio*, only ten days earlier.

Right at the beginning one is struck by the prominence at once given to the Second Vatican Council.<sup>16</sup> Evangelisation is put back in the splendid vision of *Lumen Gentium*, the Mission of the Church as the continuation and realisation throughout history of the Incarnation, God the Father sending His Son into the world and Christ sending his followers to pursue his mission (introduction). The “signs of the times”, a little absent in recent years, are back in Church discourse (question 11).

The main focus has now shifted to the countless Christians who “have heard of Christ and began once to practise the faith, but who for one reason or another have discontinued.” The “New Evangelisation” is now clearly defined as a special form of evangelisation, addressed at the secularised world in which we as Christians live. No longer the judgmental tone of earlier documents on the evils of the contemporary world. Modernity is no longer a curse but a challenge and an opportunity (questions 1, 3 & 5). People who have stepped back from the Church are not condemned but welcomed (question 14).

The outreach of the Gospel is said to address in the first place not individual people but modern culture itself whereby, it is said, “culture refers to the daily ethos, the various networks of understanding and meaning that give rise to the many, everyday connections between the person, community and society. Culture forms the vital link that relates the person to the community and the community to society” (question 6).

Without singling out specific (conservative) examples, as he had done in his first *relatio*, the Cardinal now stressed the role of small communities in general as foundational to the work of the Church with the proviso that they should not become detached from the larger parish (question 8).

Remarkable is the more generous role given to the laity and their involvement with the priests in evangelisation and in the organisation of the local Church. In contrast to the *Lineamenta*, where women are mentioned just once, they are now seen as active in Evangelisation, on one line with men (questions 13, 14 & 15).

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<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the *Lineamenta* in which the Council is referred to only ten times out of 87 quotes on the twenty-four pages text.

## THE PROPOSITIONS

From the conclusions of this second *Relatio*, small working groups in the Synod then formulated propositions for the Holy Father. With three introductory ones, fifty-eight propositions in all. In former Synods the propositions remained confidential to respect the consultative character of the Synod. The Pope would, mostly a year later, publish the results of the Synod by way of an *Adhortatio Apostolica*. This time “with the kind permission of the Holy Father” a provisional, unofficial version of the propositions was published in the Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office.<sup>17</sup>

Proposition four again puts new Evangelisation in the Trinitarian perspective of the Vatican II documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*. Proposition five acknowledges the large variety of cultures into which the Gospel must take root. The ministry of the particular Churches consists in discerning the signs of the times at each place and in each time of history to allow an “authentic inculturation of the Faith.”

Propositions seven and eight recognise that one of those cultures is the secularised world in which we live today and where so many people have taken distance from the Church. Without condemnation this world is called “a challenge and a possibility.”

In proposition twelve the Synod renews its commitment to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and its crucial importance for the New Evangelisation. Proposition sixteen picks out religious freedom as a basic human right and reaffirms the commitment of the Synod to the conciliar document *Dignitatis Humanae* (rejected by the Pius X Fraternity) and its importance for evangelisation. Proposition nineteen reminds us of the “theological, anthropological and educational bonds between evangelisation and the development and freedom of both the person and society” and says faith should be open to reason and to the results of scientific research (cf. proposition 54).

In proposition twenty-two the Synod acknowledges that the clash between good and evil is a constant feature of human life asking for conversion of each culture and each person. It urges that “pastoral structures which no longer respond to the evangelical demands of the current time” be changed.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is warmly recommended as a resource for catechists and evangelisers as part of their personal and professional preparation but it is no longer suggested to present it to people who are estranged from the Church (proposition 29). The Synod appears to accept the disappearance of frequent confession as a fact but suggests that at least one place in each diocese be especially dedicated in a permanent way for the celebration of this sacrament (proposition 33).

Contrary to recent trends the Synod strongly encourages active participation of the laity, men and women, in various ministries through which the Church exercises her saving mission. The equal dignity of men and women is underlined and mention is made of the special capacities of women including theological reflection on all levels and sharing in pastoral responsibilities in new ways (propositions 44, 45 & 46).

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino\\_25\\_xiii-ordi...](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordi...)  
Accessed 31 December 2012.

The Synod asks that attention be given to significant pastoral problems around marriage, the case of the divorced and remarried, the situation of children in broken marriages, the fate of abandoned spouses, the couples who live together without marriage and the trend in society to redefine marriage. “With maternal care and evangelical spirit the Church should seek appropriate responses for these situations, as an important aspect of the New Evangelisation” (proposition 48).

## SHIFTING PARADIGMS

Bernard Lonergan<sup>18</sup> maintains that theology passes through a radical change when theologians move from a classicist concept of culture as a universal human ideal (with its hidden ethnocentrism) to the empirical concept that recognises cultures for what they are, empirical facts, all different and in constant change.<sup>19</sup> It seems the recent Synod has crossed this line. In a matter of ten days its perspective changed. The modern secularised west changed from a sick remnant of the old (idealised) Christianity into simply another and new culture, another way of living and thinking; a world that may be losing contact with the Christian traditions of its ancestors and that rejects what it sees as the tutelage of patronising Churches (or worse) but that for all its faults has therefore not simply rejected the core values of the Gospel.

The Synod seems to have become truly missionary, like Francis Xavier who left Europe with the certitude that he was called to bring the Faith and the civilisation of the Christian world to the uncultured people of the East but who, after a few years, shared with Ignatius his surprise that the Japanese people, without ever having heard of Jesus Christ, had such a refined and noble civilisation.

Similarly, Peter Chanel and the first Catholic missionaries entering the Pacific Islands in the 1830s expected to meet naked savage cannibals on the beaches but, a year later, he and his companions were telling their superior in France about the splendid and hospitable Polynesians and their refined kava rituals. They filled pages on the hard-working men who produced the food and did the cooking while the women made tapa cloth and looked after the children. They admired them for the skilful gardeners and fishermen they were, warlike people for sure but whose tribal wars were subject to ritual and where, when the men fought, women and children were taboo and could safely walk around everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

Only this sort of missionary approach can free the Church of its obsession with the empty pews and seminaries. Only a less ecclesiocentric Church can see in modernity a new and exciting culture and share with it the treasures of the Gospel.

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), xi, 301-2.

<sup>19</sup> Paul E. Knitter, *No Other Name* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 29.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Girard, *Lettres reçues d'Océanie* (Paris: Karthala, 2009), volume 1, Document 28 (Pierre Bataillon) & Document 31 (Louis Servant); Claude Rozier, *Écrits de S. Pierre Chanel* (Rome: Marist Fathers, 1960), 313-483 (diary of Peter Chanel). See Jan Snijders, *A Mission Too Far* (Adelaide: ATF, 2012), 150-3.

## THE INDIVIDUALISING SOCIETY

In the late 1970s a group of social scientists started to measure European values. Since then numerous scholars have joined the “European Values Studies” project. The survey was repeated in 1990 and in 2000. It covers attitudes in western countries towards all aspects of life: moral values, political culture, primary relations, work and economical values, religion and Church participation.

The surveys confirm the rapid decline of Church life in most countries but they maintain that this “decline does not imply that religiosity has disappeared or that people have turned into disbelievers.”<sup>21</sup> In the 2005 *Atlas of European Values* we are told that “people who consider themselves atheists are a small minority, except in France where almost 15% say they are atheists.” The survey ascertained that the vast majority of Europeans see themselves as “religious persons.” “There is an increasing market for suppliers in new religious thoughts, institutions, rites and texts.”<sup>22</sup> Or, as put by Sarah Foot, Regius professor of ecclesiastical history: “The place of religion has shifted and we are reflecting changes in secular society ... While attendance at worship has dropped, interest in religion and in ethical decision-making has risen.”<sup>23</sup>

The extensive and in-depth researches of the European Values Studies constantly point in the same direction. The decline of traditional religious practice is primarily not linked to secularism, meaning that people would massively turn away from the spiritual to the secular, from permanent meaning and values to the *saeculum* of immediate satisfaction. Ceasing church practice does not necessarily imply losing interest in the ultimate meaning of life.

The basic characteristic of the new western culture, the survey tells us repeatedly, is not secularism but individualisation, “an increase in room for individual choice at the expense of the predominance of traditional and institutional orientations over a person’s values.”<sup>24</sup> In the new culture people define themselves by their own personal experience, not by belonging to institutions or traditions. Orientations in life have become a matter of personal choice in religious, political and other fields. Western countries show an emancipation of the individual and an increased self-reliance, with consequent decline of confidence in institutions and an increase of unconventional activities,<sup>25</sup> developments of which it is not shown that they are incompatible with the Christian Faith. No wonder the anxious preservation and restoration of traditional patterns of worship and faith strike many people as odd and meaningless. The implosion of religious practice may be the end of certain religious institutions but not necessarily the end of the Faith.

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<sup>21</sup> Loek Halman & Ole Riis, *Religion in Secularizing Society* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Loek Halman, Ruud Luijkx, Marga van Zundert, *Atlas of European Values* (Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2005), 61, 73.

<sup>23</sup> *The Tablet* (10 december 2011): 33.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Ester, Loek Halman, Ruud de Moor (eds), *The Individualizing Society* (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 1993), 72.

<sup>25</sup> Loek Halman, *Atlas*, 73. Jan Hulshof, *De Nederlandse Katholieken*, 25-8.

## MEETING ANOTHER CULTURE

Francis Xavier and Peter Chanel left Europe without the benefit of anthropological theory. Their unselfishness and humility were enough to escape culture shock. In their traces and enlightened by anthropology, later missionaries learned to be humble and respectful. They learned to listen before speaking. By listening they discovered the stepping-stones that allowed them to cross into other worlds. The other was no longer someone to be changed, but a person to be met, not someone to be shown the way, but an equal human being with whom to go on a common pilgrimage and discover what the Gospel could mean for their lives.

Facing people of another culture takes humble men and women who do not have to become judgmental to protect their own identity. Communicating also takes men and women with advanced empathy. The institution they represent must itself likewise project this humility and this empathy. Is this not the *kenosis* that Saint Paul acknowledged to be at the core of the incarnational dynamics of Christ's and thus of every Christian mission?<sup>26</sup>

## A NEW MAN AT THE WHEEL

Elijah's servant saw a little cloud on the horizon. Some people said it meant nothing.<sup>27</sup> Whether the changed tone in the Synod is significant, is too early to say. About a year after a Synod it is customary for the Pope to issue a document to present its recommendations in so far he sees fit to adopt them. In his short address of 13 June 2013 to members of the past Synod<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis limited himself to stressing the importance of a new evangelisation for "countries with an ancient Christian tradition" and to quoting Paul VI in his call to "revise the Christian message." It will be interesting to see if and to what extent Pope Francis takes over the new direction that the 2012 Synod adopted in its final sessions.

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<sup>26</sup> Phil, 2: 5-11.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Kings, 18: 44.

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/speeches/2013/june/documents](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/june/documents). Accessed 3 September 2013.