

'Out-of-date' Catholic church must listen to its late cardinal



All it took was a walking stick to change history. According to a story that has emerged since the death of Cardinal Carlo Martini, one of the most notable Catholic leaders of the past 50 years, the former archbishop of Milan deliberately used a cane when he participated in the 2005 conclave to elect a new pope after the death of John Paul II, thus signalling to his fellow cardinal voters that he was too ill to be chosen.

If Martini had ditched his stick, we might now be seeing another conclave beginning and the church would be a very different place. Given that Martini said in an interview released after his death that the Catholic church was 200 years behind the times, one must assume that a Martini papacy would have been a radical progressive one, and that the target of Martini's critique from beyond the grave is the current papacy.

Back in 1999 at a gathering of bishops, Martini hit out at the church's innate conservatism, urging a council to be held to look at church governance, shortage of priests, the role of women and marriage, alluding to the Catholic hardline stance on divorce.

Certainly these are neuralgic issues for the Catholic church, particularly in the west. Therein lies part of the problem for Roman Catholicism, just as it is for worldwide Anglicanism. While many western believers want change, particularly in the treatment of women, gay people and divorce, fellow Christians in the developing world want the status quo.

But what has happened to the Catholic church in its European heartlands must alarm the Vatican. Congregations are declining, and the damage done to the church's reputation, rocked by the child abuse scandal, has been immense. The response from certain clerics has been to turn inward, focusing on the liturgy of the church and reverting to antiquated forms. The amount of time, money and attention being spent on yards of watered silk by certain cardinals these days is deeply depressing.

So was Martini right about the church being quite so out of date?

Indeed, is it the place of the church to adapt wholesale to the spirit of the age? Or rather, does it not have a role to speak out against the ideas of the times, to be prophetic? The Catholic church was always one of communism's toughest critics, which would have appeared entirely contrary to the mood prevailing among the leaders of late 20th century eastern Europe. In South Africa, its bishops were among the Christian clerics who spoke out against apartheid. Archbishop Oscar Romero was one of the staunchest critics of legitimised terror by the Salvadoran government and paid with his life. In all these cases, the church aligned itself with the people and their suffering.

It continues doing so today, working across the world with the poor, providing education for countless children, speaking out against discrimination of the most vulnerable. In Italy, for example, the church has been vocal in its opposition to prejudice against migrants.

It speaks powerfully on race, but on issues of gender and sexuality it is years behind the times. Contraception remains the key issue where the hierarchy is so out of touch – not only with the rest of the world, but with its own members, at least in the west. On that score at least, Martini was right.

Sometimes, though, the church's caution pays dividends. Its longstanding critique of the excesses of capitalism, less well-known than its antipathy to communism and revived by Pope Benedict, now seems prescient, given the financial crisis. And its opposition to abortion, particularly in terminations on the grounds of disability, and its embrace of all those with physical impairment as equally loved by God, seems much more the spirit of the age as we watch the Paralympians, than the rejection that leads to the ending of a less-than-perfect life.

Martini, above all, wanted another council to discuss the way the Catholic church ran itself, with a lack of collegiality among bishops and too much power in the hands of the pope. But he was wrong.

It doesn't need another council, just to implement what the previous one recommended. Fifty years on from the Second Vatican Council, that would be the ideal Martini legacy.

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