

Prophet for our times



Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini must have known what he was doing when he gave an interview, to be published after his death, that amounted to a sweeping indictment of the last two papacies. Now that the former Archbishop of Milan has passed away after a long struggle with Parkinson's disease, the interview has appeared in the pages of *Corriere della Sera* where he used to write a regular column, and on pages 8-9 of this edition of *The Tablet*. Needless to say this is not the usual behaviour of retired cardinal archbishop, but he was no ordinary man. By many accounts he could have been elected pope after the death of John Paul II, but let it be known he was not fit enough for the task.

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to read this interview as an agenda for a papacy that never was, but might have been. It would have been very different from the Ratzinger papacy, with much more emphasis on reform than on continuity. There is currently a discernible sense among Catholics of waiting for the next papacy, with little expectation that the present one will provide any new surprises. What Cardinal Martini seems to have done from beyond the grave, therefore, is to present a manifesto for the next conclave, to be taken up by whoever becomes the standard-bearer of those who think like him – Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, perhaps.

Cardinal Martini's gift to the Church is to make certain things sayable again at the highest level – for instance that, as he declared on another occasion, *Humanae Vitae* was a grave mistake; and that the denial of Holy Communion to Catholics who have divorced and remarried is an abuse of power and an injustice.

As Cardinal Martini noted, these are among the reasons why the Catholic Church in Europe seems to be losing the allegiance of an entire generation. “We have to ask ourselves if people are still listening

to the advice of the Church regarding sexuality. Is the Church still an authoritative point of reference in this field or is it just a caricature in the media?” There was not much doubt where he stood.

People who do not have a vote, tend to vote with their feet. And it is at the heart of Cardinal Martini's protest that the grand vision of the Second Vatican Council represented by the concept of collegiality has been systematically frustrated. The theory was that the government of the Church belonged essentially to the college of bishops, under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome. And the collegial principle of collaboration and participation reached downwards to dioceses and parishes.

On the contrary, the government of the Church has remained in the hands of the Vatican curia, acting – not always with his knowledge and consent – as agents of the Pope. Collegiality was meant to displace this top-down ultramontane model. But the measures introduced to achieve this after Vatican II were half-hearted and easily thwarted. As a result, Catholics at all levels, from cardinals downwards it seems, feel excluded, lacking a sense of ownership. Cardinal Martini's own efforts to involve the Milanese faithful in decision-making were frustrated by the Vatican.

This saintly man, greatly loved in his own diocese, has spoken truth to power. “The Church is tired in affluent Europe and in America. Our culture has grown old, our Churches are big, our religious houses are empty, the bureaucracy of our Churches is growing out of proportion, our liturgies and our vestments are pompous ... The Church is 200 years behind the times. How come it doesn't rouse itself? Are we afraid? Fearful instead of courageous?” This is the authentic voice of an Old Testament prophet, castigating the mighty in the name of the Lord. The Church should be grateful for it.

The Tablet