

Fr. Perozich comments —

Cardinal Eijk's Dutch experience of the church has some parallels with the Church in the United States, and perhaps the rest of the world.

Individualism, affluence, attempts to be relevant to modernism, failure to connect people with Jesus in sound catechesis and reverent worship, seeking opinions of the faithful based on their experience rather than orthodox teaching of the Tradition of the Church, church organizations with strong social links but lack of spirituality, lack of relationship with Jesus, among others.

Each reader may find experiences in our U.S. church that parallel this.

Cardinal Eijk has hope.

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Dutch cardinal: Only orthodox teaching and 'worthy' liturgy will attract Catholics

'More generally,' Cdl. Willem Eijk said, 'parishes with a strong identity and a worthy Sunday liturgy have the most appeal. We see families there, young people.'

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Cardinal Willem Eijk

Olivier Figueras

By Jeanne Smits, Paris correspondent

March 26, 2020 (LifeSiteNews) — The French-based association for the promotion of the traditional liturgy of the Latin Church, *Paix liturgique* (“Liturgical peace”) recently published an interview in French with Cardinal Willem Jacobus Eijk, archbishop of Utrecht in the Netherlands regarding the future prospects of the Church in that deeply secularized country.

Cardinal Eijk spoke frankly about the decline of Catholic practice in the liberal-minded Netherlands, a fact he linked with ever-growing “individualism” and also with a lack of prayer and truly “lived” faith even before the Second Vatican Council. He also observed that only truly orthodox Church teaching and “worthy” liturgy can attract the faithful, in particular the traditional liturgy that appeals first and foremost to the young.

In its introduction to the interview, *Paix liturgique* recalled that Dutch Catholicism flourished before Vatican II, despite signs of weakness:

As in many other places where semblances of Christianity had been reconstituted (Brittany, Canada, Ireland, etc.), the upheaval that accompanied and followed Vatican II led to an extremely dramatic collapse. There, as elsewhere, the social crisis that culminated in 1968 had been preceded by an ecclesiastical revolution, with, among other figures, that of the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx. An emblematic event was the publication, in 1966, of the famous Dutch Catechism, which took great liberties with Orthodoxy. The Metropolitan See of Utrecht was occupied by Cardinal Willebrands, who was at the same time president of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and who embodied the most advanced of ecumenical spirits (“We must not speak of a ‘return’ for separated Christians,” he said).

Paix liturgique also recalls how, in the early 1980s, Dutch Catholicism was a “field of ruins.” “John Paul II made every effort, through a policy of systematically ‘classical’ appointments, to

attempt a ‘restorationist’ renaissance amidst the ruins. The man responsible for this conservative turnaround of what remained of the Dutch Church was Cardinal Simonis, who succeeded Willebrands in Utrecht in 1983,” writes the association.

“Willem Jacobus Eijk, who had defended a doctoral thesis on euthanasia and another on genetic manipulation, and who was a specialist in medical ethics, was ‘pushed’ to the fore by Simonis. Born in 1953, made a bishop in 1999, Wim Eijk was appointed by Benedict XVI as Archbishop of Utrecht in 2007, replacing Cardinal Simonis; he was made a cardinal (*in extremis*, some say!) in 2012. He was president of the Bishops’ Conference until 2016,” wrote *Paix liturgique*.

The association notes that Eijk “discreetly” entered the present debates by giving his support to the *dubia* regarding Communion for “remarried” divorced persons and by questioning the silences of the magisterium concerning communion to Lutherans. “As a result, from the Netherlands, where Progressivism had triumphed at the time of the Council, a star of hope is rising,” according to *Paix liturgique*.

Here below is LifeSite’s complete translation of the interview.

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Paix liturgique: Eminence, at the time of the Council, the Church in Holland was at the forefront of revolutionary agitation (Dutch Catechism, crazy liturgical initiatives, the “magisterium” of the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx). Pope John Paul II tried to fight against this. Looking back, how do you see these moments?

Cardinal Willem Jacobus Eijk: After the Second Vatican Council many people in the Netherlands went much too fast. People thought, among other things, that priestly celibacy would soon be abolished, and many priests took the lead. When it turned

out that this would not happen, many resigned. At the famous Pastoral Council in Noordwijkerhout (1968-1970) everyone was invited to participate in the discussion on the future of the Dutch Church, which led to much chaos. There were also many liturgical experiences, with the aim of keeping young people in the churches. All this has been in vain, because young people do not come to church to listen to the guitar; they come for Christ. If they want guitar, they prefer to go to a guitar concert.

The church in the Netherlands ultimately became polarized in this direction. Pope John Paul II was very concerned about this situation and opened a special assembly of the Synod of Bishops, together with the bishops of the Netherlands, in Rome. This took place in 1980 and was the starting point of a long journey towards normalization.

Pope John Paul II knew the Netherlands personally: as a student at the Angelicum in Rome, he had already visited the Netherlands in 1947. We have a letter from him in which he wrote that he admired the powerful organization of the Dutch Church. He nevertheless noted a lack of spirituality, a lived faith and personal prayer life among Dutch Catholics.

PL: The whole of the West has been stricken by a crisis of secularization. How do you explain this de-Christianization?

Cardinal Eijk: The first signs of the decline of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands appeared immediately after the last war. The Catholic Church in the Netherlands was an organization based more on social ties than on the content of the faith shared by its members. This was also true in other Western European countries, but perhaps a little less so. Many believers did not have enough personal ties with Christ. In fact, semi-ecclesiastical life, organized around the Church (especially with Catholic schools and Catholic sports and scouting clubs) was often the only link Catholics had with the Church – a social link.

That is what has disappeared. And that is precisely why the Church could not resist the rise of the individualistic culture in the 1960s, which reduced the strong mutual cohesion that had existed until then throughout Dutch society, and that even disappeared completely in some places. The individualism that prevailed from then onwards has its direct cause in the rapid growth of prosperity in the 1960s, which enabled people to live largely independently of one another. This culture has since become a hyper-individualistic culture thanks to the introduction of social media around 2005.

PL: This de-Christianization is very visible in Protestant communities. The Netherlands has undergone heavy Protestant influence over the last few centuries, but recent studies show that only 17 percent of people declare themselves to belong to a Protestant community, mainly to the Dutch Protestant Church. How do you see the situation of Protestant communities in the Netherlands today?

Cardinal Eijk: The Protestant communities in the Netherlands have indeed declined considerably in recent decades. The Dutch Reformed Church lost almost all of the elite and workers in the last quarter of the 19th century and then gradually emptied itself out after the First World War. Only the very orthodox Protestant denominations stabilized or even increased slightly. This is proof that orthodoxy has a future. Religions that adapt to the culture and the present time lose themselves and then lose their followers.

In fact, more generally, parishes with a strong identity and a worthy Sunday liturgy have the most appeal. We see families there, young people. The number of believers is certainly decreasing, but those who choose to be believers today are usually active believers.

LP: As the Protestants decline, Catholics have become the largest religious community in the country

(21 percent). How do you see the situation of the Church in your diocese and in your country?

Cardinal Eijk: The situation is worrying. In the second half of the 1960s, a whole generation of young people stopped going to church. These young people, now grandparents, have passed little faith on to their children – or no faith at all. And we are now dealing with their grandchildren, who generally know nothing about the Christian faith and very often are not even baptized. In 2002, less than half of the Dutch people, 43 percent, declared that they belonged to a church. This percentage then decreased by 12 points in 14 years: in 2016, only 31 percent still considered themselves members of a church. This development reflects the speed of secularization in the Netherlands. This, of course, has an impact on the number of Dutch people registered as Catholics: there were 5,106,000 in 2000, but this still seems to be declining. In 2015, a reduction of 24 percent was observed compared to 2000: the numbers declined to 3,882,000 Catholics out of a population that went from 15,864,000 to more than 16,500,000 over the same period. The number of Catholics who attend church every Sunday has fallen from 385,675 in 2003 to 186,700 in 2015: this is a decrease of 52 percent in 12 years.

Hundreds of churches have already been closed and will continue to do so. We have to be realistic about this. When the number of practicing Catholics in Western European countries declines, and the number of volunteers and the amount of financial resources are reduced as a result, it is inevitable that a large number of churches will be closed, however painful that may be.

LP: Do you see any signs of renaissance in this overall negative panorama?

Cardinal Eijk: It is early times yet to speak of a renaissance, but there are signs of hope. First of all, **when we**

celebrate the Eucharist, the Lord comes to us under the species of bread and wine, and when we receive communion, we receive Him personally, whether many or few people take part in the celebration. This is the source of a great and profound inner spiritual joy that nothing and no one, not even secularization, can take away from us. And it is not a selfish joy, insofar as those who receive it have the firm will to promote faith in Christ as much as possible.

Secondly, today's individualistic culture is not eternal: it will have to give way to a different culture, one that is more open to the Christian faith.

Finally, there is a special reason for hope. Certainly, the Church is diminishing in “quantity,” that is, in the number of Catholics. It is in itself painful and disturbing to have to acknowledge this fact. Can we be consoled by talking about the “quality” of the remaining Catholics?

LP: Are there contemplative communities in Holland?

Cardinal Eijk: Yes, but their number has decreased over the last decades. In the archdiocese of Utrecht there are religious orders and congregations of sisters and monks dedicated to prayer. Their presence in prayer is invaluable to the Church.

LP: What is the place of the proclamation of clearly assumed doctrine and morals in this renaissance?

Cardinal Eijk: According to the rector of the minor seminary of Apeldoorn, Bishop Toon Ramselaar, an important cause of the crisis of faith in the Netherlands is that the belief of Catholics was “nothing more than a system of truths and commandments” which no longer affected their daily life. The faith had therefore lost its relevance in daily life for most Catholics, so that they abandoned it en masse within a short period of time. Note that he made this observation as early as

1947, after discussions with priests and laity about the crisis of the Church they saw coming.

The history of secularization among Dutch Catholics and the diagnosis made by Karol Wojtyla [the future John Paul II] immediately after the Second World War have taught us one thing: the proclamation of catechesis and the unfolding of the liturgy must have a spiritual character in the sense that they should not be limited to a transfer of abstract truths and ethical statements, but that it is important that they lead children, young people and adults to a truly personal relationship with Christ and to a true life of prayer.

LP: And what is the place of liturgy in this renaissance? Do you think that the return to a sense of the sacred, to silence and adoration is important in developing a new evangelization?

Cardinal Eijk: It is essential. Today, the guest rooms in the monasteries are crowded. Those who come to monasteries in this way lack something in their daily life and seek to find it in the silence of the religious houses. This can be a first step towards a return to faith. Unfortunately, though, the visit to the monastery is a one-off: once back in daily life, the overload of activities starts again for everyone as before.

In any case, the sacred silence of the church, adoration, worthy celebrations are indispensable and, moreover, all this seems to attract people who are looking for God.

LP: Are there any groups in Holland attached to the extraordinary form of the Roman rite?

Cardinal Eijk: Yes, there are, but they are still small. An Association for the Latin Liturgy has existed in the Netherlands since 1967. Initially, its aim was to promote Latin celebrations according to the Novus Ordo. But since Pope Benedict XVI's *Motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*, this association is now committed to the Latin Mass according to the extraordinary form

of the Roman liturgy. In these celebrations according to the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Liturgy, it is striking that the faithful are often young people. However, their numbers are not yet very large in the Netherlands, unlike in France, for example.

PL: Do these groups have a role to play in the new evangelization of the country?

Cardinal Eijk: I would say that they do not play a major role in re-evangelization, but they demonstrate unequivocally that the future is for the Orthodox faith, clearly and authentically manifested. These ceremonies are attractive and people come to them.

LP: In 2017 the Society of St. Pius X bought the Church of St. Willibrord in Utrecht. Are you hopeful that it can join in a re-evangelization effort?

Cardinal Eijk: I am happy that St. Willibrord has been preserved for a liturgical function. But I am not in a position to judge the role of the FSSPX in the re-evangelization of the Netherlands.

PL: Do you think that the extraordinary form of the liturgy has a future and a role in the future of the Church?

Cardinal Eijk: Yes, it seems to me that the extraordinary form of the Roman liturgy will have a role in the future of the Church. The extent of this role is difficult to measure and it will probably vary from one country to another. In any case, Latin is indispensable as a liturgical language, even in the ordinary form of the liturgy.