

Cardinal analyzes why Netherlands lost Catholic faith in few short decades

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September 25, 2020 ([LifeSiteNews](#)) – Why are the tiny Netherlands, whose missionaries represented over 12 percent of Roman Catholic priests and religious bringing the faith to foreign countries around 1960, today one of the most secularized countries in the world? Of all the questions addressed by Cardinal Willem Jacobus Eijk in his recent book of dialogues with Italian journalist Andrea Galli, this was the one that struck commentators most.

The Cardinal borrowed his answer from a book written in 1947 after a meeting of nine laymen and priests in his own diocese of Utrecht years before a major crisis hit Dutch Catholicism. In the 1947 book *Ferment in the care of souls*, these concerned Catholics, he said, “saw that the bond between Catholics and the Church was no longer based on the contents of the faith.”

“Membership in the Church was essentially a community factor: one went to Catholic primary school, then to Catholic secondary school, and was a member of Catholic associations, especially in the sports and scouting fields. One was Catholic for reasons of social belonging, because one grew up in Catholic structures, not on the basis of a lived faith,” Cardinal Eijk remarks. It was a faith that “could not withstand such radical culture changes as those of the 1960’s.” That time of prosperity and growing individualism gradually led to the “hyper-individualism” that Cardinal Eijk has more than once pointed out as being at the root of modern-day Holland’s rejection of God – [as in this interview with LifeSite in May 2019](#), many of whose themes are present in his new book, *Dio viva in Olanda* (“God lives in Holland”). Revealingly, the subtitle of his book is a quote from Saint Luke: “When the Son of man comes, will He find faith on earth?”

Prosperity and individualism, planted in a society whose faith was not profound, is certainly part of the story. It was in the Netherlands that the “New Catechism” first took hold, and that a mass exodus of priests took place after 1965 – many left the priesthood to get married, while a large proportion of the remaining priests embraced Modernism.

Cardinal Eijk describes the process with striking examples: while he himself received “an explicit Catechism about Heaven, Hell and Purgatory” while preparing First Communion at the end of the 1950s, he witnessed how in his last years in High School, in 1967 and 1968, “religion class became different, losing all religious content” – but the classes were given by priests.

“Everything was discussed: politics, abortion, free love, and people smoked during classes,” Cardinal Eijk recalled. Professors left the priesthood but continued to teach, and the students would simply be asked no longer to address them as “Father” but “Sir” when they came back from holidays. At the beginning of his High School years all the students would go to church on Sundays: “At the end there were two of us.”

Later on in the book, Cardinal Eijk notes that 385,000 Catholics – a fraction of the 5,000,000 Catholics in the Netherlands at the time – went to church every week in 2003. “In 2015 there were 186,000, that is 52 percent less” – for 3,882,000 Catholics in total. “Less than 50 percent of Catholics have their children baptized.”

No wonder that when Cardinal Eijk took possession of his diocese of Utrecht in 2007, his first concerns were with financial matters: the Catholic Church relies only on the donations of the faithful and these are dwindling. Closing churches and parishes that are too expensive to keep up, asking salaried workers to leave, these were the issues that were at the top of his agenda in order to avoid bankruptcy. Many of the Catholics who do practice the faith regularly in Utrecht today are immigrants both from inside and outside of Europe. Cardinal Eijk’s story, as his book clearly shows, is that of a seemingly failing church where a mere “remnant” of convinced believers is left of a once flourishing community. In his own diocese, he was compelled to close six out of seven churches.

Sandro Magister quoted Cardinal Eijk’s remarks above on the meeting that led to the publication of *Ferment in the care of souls*. But he stops before this remarkable phrase:

“The group that met in Utrecht in 1947 had very clearly foreseen the collapse that would take place in the middle of the 1960s. One of them wrote about the Catholics of the time: ‘There are powerful armies that are preparing the great apostasy of the near future, it is a slow and unobserved process.’”

One would have liked the journalist of *Avvenire*, Andrea Galli, who penned the book with Cardinal Eijk, to ask him to expand on this. It goes far beyond the complaint and the claim that Catholicism was too “social” and not centered enough on personal faith in Jesus-Christ. It suggests that the Modernism and the “progressivism” that the Cardinal identifies in the book — in which he affirms that “the true crisis of the Church in the western world is a crisis of the faith” — were in fact imposed by distinct driving forces on the Catholic population.

As a Dutch national born and raised in foreign lands to a couple of convinced, profoundly faithful Catholics, I often heard my father describe that collective apostasy in our home country. I was born in the beginning of the 60s, when both my parents were already over 40, as the little one of a family of five children. I would return to the Netherlands with them roughly every two years, and each time it would be clear that the situation had worsened: ordinary, faithful Catholics, often with large families, were going to churches where their priests preached new, un-Catholic ideas, and introduced novel liturgical practices that could but diminish the belief in the True Presence of Christ in the consecrated Host. *Humanae vitae* was institutionally ridiculed by the hierarchy. I remember a girl cousin, ten years older than myself, coming home to my aunt's house from a parish youth meeting saying that the priest said that it was all right to sleep around. At eight, I had no idea what she meant, but I realized it was something that was not good, and her words stuck with me until I was able to understand them. I also remember my father's anger, and his frequent pleading with priests and family to open their eyes to the revolution to which they were blindly submitting.

If truth be told, it seems to me with hindsight that, while perhaps being mere "social" Catholics who had but a mechanical knowledge of the faith, many of the Dutch people we knew at the time were so used to following and believing the clergy that they swallowed all the innovations presented by priests who had been revolutionized first – all the more easily that the innovations were less demanding on the moral plane. Perhaps the new ideas fell on the soil of badly instructed Catholics, of a new generation that had already not been properly catechized – and whose parents were unable to keep them from joining the collective march towards apostasy. Most of my (innumerable) cousins were ten to fifteen years older than myself: it was this set of young adults who were swallowing the poison of heterodoxy, but the poison was distilled by unfaithful priests.

Cardinal Eijk speaks little in his book of the revolution brought about in the Church at the time of, or because of Vatican II; nor of the liturgical revolution that ransacked our common treasure of worship that was still filling churches when my own parents were young before World War Two, and that sent thousands of Dutch (and Flemish) priests and religious to the ends of the earth as missionaries until the 60s.

These remarks by Cardinal Eijk deserve a mention, however: "One of the intentions of the Vatican Council II was for the Church to open up to society, which it did, but society for its part has not opened up to the Church. On the contrary, it has expelled it from public life. The Church then fell into one of the deepest faith crises in its history and today is not in the best position to transmit the faith to society. Many lay people and pastors are confused about the contents of the faith. Only after putting its own house in order will the Church once again be truly capable of evangelizing the world." But is it absurd to think that such a flourishing Christendom with its generous vocations was a special target for Modernism, a hunting ground for the Devil who wanted to strike hard where he could cause most damage?

Wim Eijk, born to a Catholic mother and a Baptist father in 1953, appears not to have been hit by this crisis of the faith. His touching story of his youth and his fight to defend his faith and even more his priestly vocation within his own family gives rise to beautiful passages in his talks with Galli. Having first embarked in medical studies before he finally entered the seminary – the "classical" seminary of Rolduc in the Catholic southern province of Limburg – Eijk was ordained a priest in 1983, after the worst of the Modernist and liturgical revolution had been fought. He shows how he is a member of a new, more traditional generation of priests, and how he was lucky to have one of the rare traditional parish priests in his hometown when he was young.

It is his serene and steadfast faith, especially in the Eucharist that is clearly at the core of his priestly life, that stands out most in the pages of *Dio vive in Olanda*. Cardinal Eijk describes with passion his love of the Church's daily prayer of the Psalms, that give words to all man's joys, sorrows and interrogations in his relation to God, and that God the Son Himself, Jesus-Christ, prayed when walking on the Holy Land.

Another striking aspect of his book is his knowledge of bioethics and the culture of death. Cardinal Eijk was a doctor with the promise of a good university career before he entered the seminary, and already he was confronted with euthanasia and abortion requests that he consistently rejected. He later specialized in bioethics and has fought to defend the Church's stance on abortion and euthanasia, founded on the commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." He also tells how he upheld the Church's teachings against contraception and artificial procreation, even when married couples only use their own reproductive cells. To Cardinal Eijk, it is clear that today, Catholics – especially in the realm of medical professions – face a kind of "persecution" when countering euthanasia and abortion, having to be careful "not to lose their jobs," and he also laments that both these practices have become very widely accepted by doctors of every persuasion.

Cardinal Eijk has closely followed the euthanasia debate that in the Netherlands, dates back to the end of the 1960s, and he is very aware of the "slippery slope" that was engaged upon. But he also shows how in politics, collaboration of Catholics with certain traditionally-minded Protestants can put a brake on this regressive evolution.

"The Netherlands now has a government consisting of a right-wing liberal party, a left-wing liberal party — advocate of the 2002 euthanasia law and the legalization of so-called same-sex marriage in 2001 — and also the CDA and the CU. These last two Christian parties stood in the way of the previous government's plan to pass a law on so-called "complete life," to allow assisted suicide for people who say they are suffering unbearably and without hope of improvement on account of non-medical causes like loneliness, bereavement, advanced age. [...] Although the liberals in government said they were in favor of approving this legislative proposal, the two Christian parties were able to block it," Cardinal Eijk wrote in a passage quoted by Sandro Magister.

He went further, explaining the profound unacceptability of euthanasia: “Putting an end to life by our own initiative means refusing this most precious gift and is therefore a sign of ingratitude. Certainly we can and must give our life back to God, but in a very different manner, by imitating Jesus who accepted suffering and death on the Cross. We can give our life back to God by uniting ourselves to the sacrifice of Jesus.” This is “realized most highly in the celebration of the Eucharist, with the sacrifice of the Cross that renews itself in an unbloody but real way,” he recalled, using the traditional language of the Church regarding the Holy Mass.

Interestingly, when speaking of the Neogothic church of Saint Willibrord that was closed in Utrecht and later bought by the Fraternity of Saint Pius Xth, Cardinal Eijk said he had “good relations” with its clergy. “We should not have too high expectations regarding the timing, but I think that at a certain point full and visible union with the Fraternity of Saint Pius Xth will be arrived at,” he said.

In the same way that he pleads for courageous witness to the truth, even to difficult truths – something “even some bishops and some priests back away from” – Cardinal Eijk steadfastly speaks for priestly celibacy, which he himself embraced primarily as a “sign of the Kingdom of Heaven” where there will be no marriage.

As a conclusion to these dialogues, Galli asked Cardinal Eijk whether he thought there is not enough mention of eternal life today.

The Cardinal had already said, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic:

“At the beginning of the Coronavirus crisis I wrote in a message to the community that we were obliged to face an illness for which we had no therapy and no vaccine: the opportunity to realize once again the fact that our life is in the hands of God, of Divine Providence. Let us hope that many will have been able to think about the main questions of life and that they have started to pray again.”

Answering the question about the “last things,” Cardinal Eijk was even more explicit. Recognizing that the theme tends to cause “a certain embarrassment,” he added:

“In our sermons, in our catechesis, we must talk about Paradise, about our destiny of glory, of the beatific vision that awaits those who are saved. Seeing God face to face. On the other hand, there is Purgatory, and also Hell where one is separated from God – a source of infinite suffering.

“Our duty is to do everything so that people may not end up in Hell,” Cardinal Eijk said.

His book is not one of despair despite the many difficulties facing the Church and in particular the Church in the Netherlands where so many have abandoned the faith. Eijk makes clear that in the younger generation, those who come to Church accept all her traditional teachings and have a real prayer life: “Many speak of the danger of a schism, but I think not. I rather think that what has already happened with us in Holland will happen in many parts of the world. There has been a silent healing through the turnover of generations. [...] Because who will ultimately remain in the Church? The priests and laity of '68, of those years of disarray, with ultra-progressive ideas, are almost gone. In Holland there are still those who believe, who pray, who have a personal relationship with Christ.”

But what will be the fate of those who have fallen away?