



# BEING CHRISTIAN IN THE WORLD: REFUGE AND RISK

*Posted on March 1, 2023 by Pierre Manent*



The present situation makes the Benedictine option desirable and plausible, but it is not without the risk of sliding towards communitarianism. And a Christian cannot run away from his responsibilities to a temporal order, and notably the political.

The present situation of the Catholic Church in our country seems to me to be determined by the following three parameters:

First, the rapid decrease in the social presence of Catholicism since the 1960s—a quantitative decrease that is approaching a threshold where the disappearance of the Catholic fact becomes conceivable.

Second, the irruption of a historically unprecedented factor, Islam, which occupies a growing place, visibly growing, in French society.

Third, the enthronement of the ideology of human rights as the exclusive principle of political, social, and moral legitimacy, installing each "me" in an immanence sure of its right.

On whatever side the French Catholic turns, he sees a threat rising up that can seem insurmountable, coming simultaneously from within, from outside and from himself! The temptation is great to respond to this triple offensive by resorting to the eternal strategy of the weakest party: the defensive, the refuge in a stronghold. In fact, we still have sufficient resources to build a good-looking Catholic fortress: sheltered behind its ramparts, we would no longer be demoralized by the indifference or hostility of global society, Muslims would become external and foreign to us again as they were forty years ago, and by "tightening the bolts" of a Christian life delivered from equivocations and timidities, by forming among ourselves this "Christian society" that France is no longer, we would be able to reorient our lives in the direction of the Transcendent.

### **Need for Social Support**

This last argument must be taken seriously. Indeed, as supernatural as it is in its source and its intimate workings, the Christian life inevitably depends on social supports placed at our disposal by the collective organization of which we are members: places of worship, financial means, competent administrators, respected pastors, and in general everything that contributes to the social authority of

the religious institution. It is only when they are subjected to systematic persecution—a situation, as we know, which does not exclude great spiritual fruitfulness—that Christians are entirely deprived of such support.

It is, moreover, the need to find such support that in the past led the Church to ask for help from the political authorities, a help that she obtained at the price of obscuring her own vocation, which caused an incurable wound in her credibility. No one today asks for or proposes such political support. It is unthinkable. That is why the withering of the Church's social vitality (that social vitality which had allowed her in the first part of the last century to adapt with some success to her exclusion from the political sphere) is such a cause for concern or anguish for Catholics today, a concern or anguish which makes the "Benedictine option" desirable and plausible.

However, if this option is to effect—that is its purpose—of concentrating the forces of Catholics and giving them back a sense of strength, this revival would, I believe, be short-lived. This Benedictine option seems to me to have three disadvantages.

1. Any defensive regrouping entails the risk of sectarian closure, with the inevitable weakening of intellectual and even moral demands, since we would now be "among ourselves." As soon as we give up trying to convince, persuade or even interest those who are "outside," a great source of improvement is lost. Moreover, we would be claiming to be reaping before the renewal of Catholic intellectual life (which is the most encouraging aspect of the present situation of Catholicism) has reached maturity.
2. Since we need collective or social support, we must not exaggerate their contribution to Christian life. Whatever the political and social situation, leading a truly Christian life remains the most difficult and improbable thing in the world; it remains that fragile miracle which constantly enlightens and renews the life of the world. If Catholics, or Christians in general, are sincere, they admit that our little faith, hope and charity are not responsible for anything other than our little faith, hope and charity. The threshold of the Christian life is therefore not the accusation of the "world" or "society" but penance, "the repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).
3. There is no remedy, nor should we seek one, for the situation facing the Christian. It entails a double obligation, of fidelity to the Church and of mission to one's neighbor, a mission as urgent and perilous today as it was in the time of the Apostles. Let us not covet, but rather fear, the impression of recovered strength that a Catholic "gathering" would easily create. Paul's authority

assures us that there are always enough of us so that God's strength can be seen in our weakness.

Moreover, our responsibility as Christians is no less political or civic than properly religious. This Europe that turns its back on us, let us not turn our backs on it in turn. If we want to give a generous meaning to what otherwise risks remaining a slogan, the "Christian roots of Europe," we must hold ourselves responsible for what is happening in Europe, co-responsible with the other citizens concerned about the common fate, but also especially responsible as Christians who claim the unparalleled part—good and bad mixed—that their religion has taken, in the deepening of the European soul.

### **The Civic Obligation of Christians**

This is where the relationship of the Church to herself, to her own life, and her relationship to Europe come together. Christians cannot devote themselves exclusively to the deepening of their sacramental life, however essential it may be. As citizens and as Christians they cannot abandon Europe to its fate. They have an inseparable civic and Christian obligation to preserve what, for lack of a better expression, I call the "Christian mark" of Europe.

Now, the shift imposed by the present pontificate has redoubled the difficulty of this task. On the one hand, *ad intra*, the sacramental rule is obscured or "blurred," those thresholds that give meaning and relief to the interior life of the Church are erased. On the other hand, *ad extra*, religions are equalized, indifference to their dogmatic and moral content is shown, and the religious composition of the European population is shown to be of the utmost indifference.

Thus, the political and religious articulations of the present world are ignored or brutalized. This politically and religiously unformed humanity is the subject and the vehicle of a religion without any other content than emotional or sentimental. In such an involution, the dulling of the religious requirement is one with the darkening of the political view. We see that the urgency for the Christian citizens of Europe is not less civic than religious. For them, it is a matter of preserving or reviving the Christian mark of the European nations, and inseparably of preserving or reviving their political legitimacy. Instead of seeking refuge in a "small Christian society," accept to be a citizen and a Christian in the greater society, inhospitable as it has always been.

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[\*\*Featured:\*\*](#) *Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes*, by Ambrosius Francken I; painted ca. early 16th century.

