

Open letter addressed to the bishops of France by the Association "We Are Church-France"

It is with joy that we have received the report of the Dutch Dominicans "Kerk en Ambt"(Church and Ministry). The situations described and the questions raised are in effect directly transferable to France.

The advanced age of priests and the lack of recruitment constitute a grave crisis. Like you we have seen our communities progressively deprived of the services of an ordained priest. As rank and file Christians we have the right to question you in freedom and respect: despite the numerous cries of alarm, have you not ignored the crisis and preferred to keep silent rather than displease Rome, leaving communities in turmoil and often without the Eucharist? Have you not perceived the positive side which we put to you to adapt to the new situation of the Church in a world which has changed?

We do not under-estimate the difficulties of your Episcopal responsibility. But we must advance. The great merit of the authors of the Dutch report is to have had the courage to go public. People are talking. The questions posed arouse debate and discussion: why do you not allow communities to democratically chose their leaders and the women and men who will preside at the Eucharist and the sacraments which they celebrate? Is it necessary to recruit them from among celibate men? What is the status of women? Is it necessary to give priority to this structure of priesthood contrary to the right of communities to the Eucharist? Is it not necessary to review the exercise of power in the Church?

The mess is immense. It is plain to all. As the French Dominican Herve Legrand said, commenting on the text of his Dutch brethren: " You must give credit to the Provincial authorities that their alarm-cry is justified as such... Now that the debate is launched, it is necessary to conduct it according to clear and adequate rules."

The request which we address to you is simple: that you put in place a major discussion within the wider Church community and that you stimulate the debate. Far from being a menace to the Church, it will turn out to be a true godsend from which it is bound to profit.

"When the Spirit of Truth comes to you , He will lead you to all truth."

Note for journalists.

An alarm -cry has been sounded by Catholic Christians. Faced with a deep crisis in the Church they have questioned their bishops and asked them to open a wide-ranging debate on the Church in the modern world in the light of a report by the Dominican Province of Holland, widely circulated in the parishes of their country. This text, entitled "Church and Ministry" poses publicly burning questions about the status of ordained priests and clerical power. It proposes, for example, that the future leaders of communities be chosen democratically by the rank and file, and then presented to the bishop; it would no longer be obligatory to have celibate males. Far from being anodyne, these questions and many

others, touch extremely sensitive nerves and are revealing of profound changes of mentality which go hand in hand with the evolution of our societies. It would no longer be possible to say "Church" to mean "Institution" or "Hierarchy"

It is nothing more than that.

You will find these different texts on the web-site www.nsaefr.com