



Religious Stirrers

by Jonathan Aitken

CARDINAL MARTINI SHOOK up a heady intellectual cocktail for the Catholic Church before he passed away. His recently published last testament has stunned the Vatican and set the faithful arguing about the direction of Catholicism in the 21st century. At nearly the same time, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the retiring leader of 100 million worldwide Anglicans, has been stirring up his flock with valedictory messages.

The lives of Cardinal Martini and Archbishop Williams share common themes. Both have held the highest academic positions and been recognized as great scholars, having produced over 50 works of theology between them. Both are remarkable linguists—Martini spoke 11 languages and Williams speaks six. Their prelatial concoctions pack a punch, and both will certainly enliven the debates about the future of the world's two largest churches.

Cardinal Carlo Martini, who died on August 31, was the best modern pope we never had. (Though his views will undoubtedly jar with those of conservative Catholics.) A towering figure in the College of Cardinals, he ruled himself out of contention as a successor to John Paul II after the onset of Parkinson's disease. But his intellectual influence was immense. As archbishop of Milan, he was the counterweight to papal conservatism. On a crucial range of issues—contraception, homosexuality, family values, and the right to end life—he took popular positions that made him almost a leader of the opposition within the hierarchy of the church.

Just before his death, Martini lifted the veil on the theological and doctrinal nuances of his opposition. He refused artificial feeding (in contravention of church policy on end-of-life issues) and delivered a last testament in the form of an interview with *Corriere della Sera* that subsequently made global headlines. It is easy to see why his final words

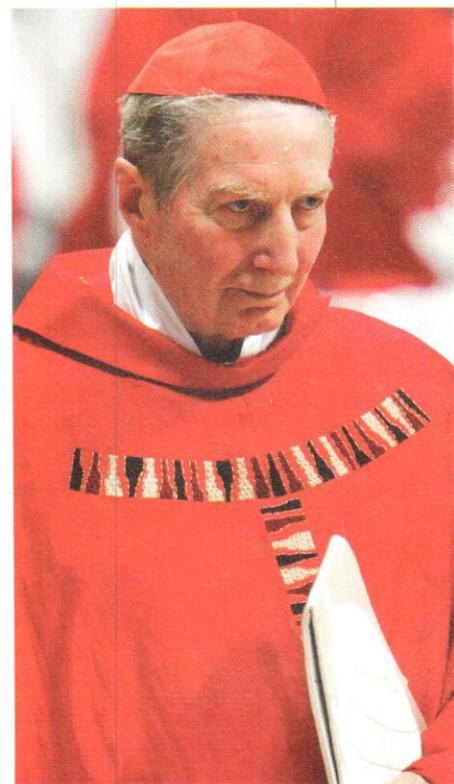
rocked the ecclesiastical establishment and revived hope among millions of rank-and-file Catholics:

The Church is tired in affluent Europe and 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. Yet maybe those things express what we've become today ...

Martini went on to call for “a radical transformation beginning with the Pope and his bishops,” adding that “the child sex scandals oblige us to undertake a journey of transformation.”

The dying cardinal wanted transformation that included an overhaul on the Church's line on birth control, clergy celibacy, divorce, remarried couples, and gay relationships. “We must ask ourselves if people still listen to the Church's advice on sexual matters. Is the Church still a relevant authority in this field or just a caricature in the media?”

Martini was a modernizer who believed the Church must become more flexible if it is to revive without alienating the faithful. He presented his arguments in ways that could appeal



to both sides of the conservative/liberal divide. He suggested that the secular legalization of abortion had been a “positive” development because it could “reduce or eliminate” illegal procedures. He argued that condoms might constitute a “lesser evil” than the spread of HIV/AIDS.

One practical area where Martini was a noted radical concerned Church appointments. He wanted to open the senior positions to younger talents with fresh ideas. He had interesting ideas about rotating cardinals, archbishops, and bishops to new jobs every few years in order to keep them at the cutting edge of pastoral evangelism. He made three attempts to stand down as archbishop of Milan (the world’s largest archdiocese, with 5 million Catholics) but was refused the Vatican’s permission to do so.

Because Martini never became pope, he could promote the reforms for which he had such zeal to only a limited audience and with limited prestige. Williams did climb to the top of the greasy Anglican pole. But now, on the verge of retirement, he has spoken with engaging self-deprecation about his sense of failure and frustration. “I don’t think I cracked it,” he says, highlighting his mistakes on several issues that divide his disparate flock. He was troubled by the impossibility of maintaining doctrinal unity, sometimes even civil discourse, between the fast-growing and highly conservative African churches at one end of the spectrum and the liberal American Episcopal churches at the other.

“Thinking back over things I don’t think I’ve got right over the last 10 years,” says Williams. “I think it might have helped a lot if I’d gone sooner to the United States when things began to get difficult about the ordination of gay bishops, and engaged more directly with the American House of Bishops.”

Williams feels his church has been “wrong” in its treatment of homosexuals but

remains opposed to same-sex marriages. He supports women bishops but has been unable to make progress on this even within the comparatively open-minded Church of England. Nor has he been able to make any meaningful contribution to the dialogue between Islam and Christianity. In fact he made things worse, at least among his own faithful, by suggesting that Islamic Sharia law should be recognized by the courts. The furor that greeted his pronouncements on this subject (including calls for his resignation) now leads Williams to concede that raising this issue was a mistake.

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As Williams is retiring at the young age of 62 to become master of a Cambridge college, he would almost certainly agree with Martini’s view that the top ecclesiastical jobs be rotated and rejuvenated. More controversially, Williams believes that the highest position in Anglicanism is too big a role for any one occupant to fill. He now advocates a sort of job-share arrangement by which a new president of the Anglican Commission would take some of the load off the archbishop of Canterbury. He thinks there should be “less of a sense that the Archbishop is expected to sort everything.”

Sorting out the Anglican and Catholic churches across the world is a gargantuan task. The great divide is geographical: between the demands of the expanding congregations in Africa and the defensiveness of the contracting ones in Europe and America. But in both arenas we need spiritual leaders who are intellectuals of the highest stature. Cardinal Martini and Archbishop Williams were both giants of the religious mind. We should read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest their departing messages. ✠

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