

## Fr. O'Reilly On The Idea Of A Long-Term Vacancy Of The Holy See

In 1882 a book was published in England called *The Relations of the Church to Society - Theological Essays*, comprising twenty-nine essays by Fr. Edmund James O'Reilly S.J., one of the leading theologians of his time. The book expresses with wonderful clarity and succinctness many important theological truths and insights on subjects indirectly as well as directly related to its main theme. For our purposes the book has in one respect an even greater relevance than it did at the time of publication, for in it Fr. O'Reilly asserts with the full weight of such authority as he possesses, the following opinions:

1. that a vacancy of the Holy See lasting for an extended period of time cannot be pronounced to be incompatible with the promises of Christ as to the indefectibility of the Church; and
2. that it would be exceedingly rash to set any prejudged limits as to what God will be prepared to allow to happen to the Holy See (other, of course, than that a true pope will never fall into heresy, nor in any way err).

Of course Fr. O'Reilly does not have the status of pope or Doctor of the Church; but, that said, he was certainly no negligible authority. Some idea of the esteem in which he was held can be obtained from the following facts:

Cardinal Cullen, then Bishop of Armagh, chose him as his theologian at the Synod of Thurles in 1850.

Dr. Brown, bishop of Shrewsbury, chose him as his theologian at the Synod of Shrewsbury.

Dr. Furlong, bishop of Ferns and his former colleague as professor of theology at Maynooth, chose him as his theologian at the Synod of Maynooth.

He was named professor of theology at the Catholic University in Dublin on its foundation.

The General of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Beckx, proposed to appoint him professor of theology at the Roman College in Rome, though as it turned out circumstances unrelated to Fr. O'Reilly intervened to prevent that appointment.

At a conference held regarding the philosophical and theological studies in the Society of Jesus, he was chosen to represent all the English-speaking "provinces" of the Society - that is, Ireland, England, Maryland, and the other divisions of the United States.

In short Fr. O'Reilly was widely recognised as one of the most erudite and important theologians of his time.

Finally, the following quotation by Dr. Ward in the justly renowned *Dublin Review* (January 1876 issue) is worth quoting (emphasis added):

"Whatever is written by so able and solidly learned a theologian - *one so docile to the Church and so fixed in the ancient theological paths* - cannot but be of signal benefit to the Catholic reader in these anxious and perilous times."

Dr. Ward thought his times were anxious and perilous! Well, let us now see what "signal benefit" we, a little more than a century later, can derive from some of Fr. O'Reilly's writing.

We open with a brief passage from an early chapter of the book, called "The Pastoral Office of the Church". On page 33 Fr. O'Reilly says this (emphases added):

"If we inquire how ecclesiastical jurisdiction...has been continued, the answer is that...it in part came and comes immediately from God on the fulfilment of certain conditions regarding the persons. Priests having jurisdiction derive it from bishops or the pope. The pope has it immediately from God, on his *legitimate* election. The legitimacy of his election *depends on the observance of the rules established by previous popes regarding such election.*"

Thus, if papal jurisdiction *depends* on a person's *legitimate* election, which certainly is not verified in the case of the purported election of a formal heretic to the Chair of Peter, it follows that, in the *absence* of legitimate election, *no jurisdiction whatever* is granted, neither "*de jure*" nor, despite what some have tried to maintain, "*de facto*".

Fr. O'Reilly makes the following remark later in his book (page 287 - our emphases added):

"A doubtful pope *may be* really invested with the requisite power; but he has not *practically* in relation to the Church the same right as a *certain* pope - He is not entitled to be acknowledged as Head of the Church, and may be legitimately compelled to desist from his claim."

This extract comes from one of two chapters devoted by Fr. O'Reilly to the Council of Constance of 1414. It may be remembered that the Council of Constance was held to put an end to the disastrous schism which had begun thirty-six years earlier, and which by that time involved no fewer than three claimants to the Papacy, each of whom had a considerable following. Back to Fr. O'Reilly:

"The Council assembled in 1414...

"We may here stop to inquire what is to be said of the position, at that time, of the three claimants, and their rights with regard to the Papacy. In the first place, there was all through, from the death of Gregory XI in 1378, a Pope - with the exception, of course, of the intervals between deaths and elections to fill up the vacancies thereby created. There was, I say, at every given time a Pope, really invested with the dignity of Vicar of Christ and Head of the Church, whatever opinions might exist among many as to his genuineness; *not that an interregnum covering the whole period would have been impossible or inconsistent with the promises of Christ, for this is by no means manifest*, but that, as a matter of fact, there was not such an interregnum."

Thus one of the great theologians of the nineteenth century, writing subsequently to the 1870 Vatican Council, tells us that it is "by no means manifest" that a thirty-six year interregnum would have been impossible or inconsistent with the promises of Christ. And we can therefore legitimately ask: at what stage, if any, *would* such be manifest? After thirty-seven years? Or forty-seven years? Clearly, once it is established *in principle* that a long interregnum is not incompatible with the promises of Christ, the question of *degree* - how long - cannot enter into the question. That is up to God to decide, and who can know what astonishing things He may *in fact* decide.

And, indeed, as Fr. O'Reilly proceeds further in this remarkable chapter, written over a hundred years ago but surely fashioned by Divine Providence much more expressly for our day than for his, he makes this very point about what it can and cannot be assumed that God will permit. From page 287 (all emphases added):

"There had been anti-popes before from time to time, but never for such a continuance...nor ever with such a following...

"The great schism of the West suggests to me a reflection which I take the liberty of expressing here. *If this schism had not occurred, the hypothesis of such a thing happening would appear to many*

*chimerical. They would say it could not be; God would not permit the Church to come into so unhappy a situation. Heresies might spring up and spread and last painfully long, through the fault and to the perdition of their authors and abettors, to the great distress too of the faithful, increased by actual persecution in many places where the heretics were dominant. But that the true Church should remain between thirty and forty years without a thoroughly ascertained Head, and representative of Christ on earth, this would not be.* Yet it has been; and we have no guarantee that it will not be again, though we may fervently hope otherwise. What I would infer is, *that we must not be too ready to pronounce on what God may permit.* We know with absolute certainty that He will fulfil His promises; not allow anything to occur at variance with them; that He will sustain His Church and enable her to triumph over all enemies and difficulties; that He will give to each of the faithful those graces which are needed for each one's service of Him and attainment of salvation, as He did during the great schism we have been considering, and in all the sufferings and trials which the Church has passed through from the beginning. We may also trust He will do a great deal more than what He has bound Himself to by His promises. We may look forward with a cheering probability to exemption for the future from some of the troubles and misfortunes that have befallen in the past. *But we, or our successors in future generations of Christians, shall perhaps see stranger evils than have yet been experienced,* even before the immediate approach of that great winding up of all things on earth that will precede the day of judgment. I am not setting up for a prophet, nor pretending to see unhappy wonders, of which I have no knowledge whatever. *All I mean to convey is that contingencies regarding the Church, not excluded by the Divine promises, cannot be regarded as practically impossible, just because they would be terrible and distressing in a very high degree."*

While Fr. O'Reilly himself disclaims any status as a prophet, nevertheless a true prophecy is clearly exactly what this passage amounts to. Moreover it is the kind of prophecy which, provided it is advanced *conditionally*, as in this case, both can and should be made in the light of the evidence on which he is concentrating his gaze. In respect of much that lies in the future there is no need for special revelations in order that we may know it. As Fr. O'Reilly indicates, except where God has specifically *told* us that something will not occur, any assumptions concerning what He will not permit are rash; and of course such assumptions will have the disastrous result that people will be misled if the events in question *do* occur. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, saith the Lord." (Isaias 55:8)