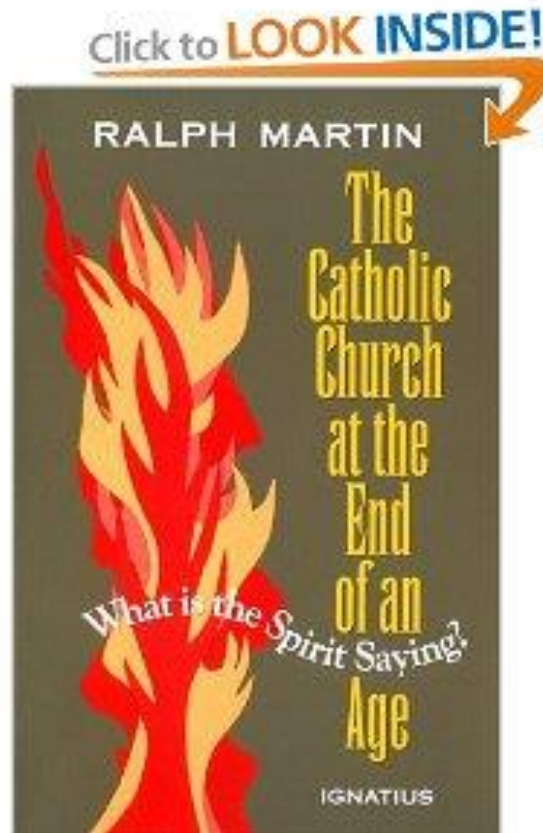


A Summary of *The Catholic Church and the End of an Age* by Ralph Martin



A Summary of *The Catholic Church at the End of an Age: What is the Spirit Saying?* by Ralph Martin

San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994

ISBN: 0-89870-524-X

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About the Author

Ralph Martin is a well-known author, national speaker, television personality, and leader in the charismatic renewal movement in the Catholic Church. He holds a bachelor's degree from Notre Dame and a Master's in Theology from Sacred Heart School of Theology in Detroit. He has done his graduate work in Philosophy at Princeton. He has worked for the Cursillo Movement, and founded the New Covenant Magazine and the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Office. He is president of Renewal Ministries in addition to being a visiting Professor of Theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville and Ave Maria College, as well as Assistant Professor at Sacred Heart School of Theology.

General Overview

In both the world and the Church, the future seems unclear. God pours out His Spirit upon the Church continually even though distractions and free will can drown out the message. Through this transition, however, the Spirit still speaks clearly. This book is an attempt to convey some of the Spirit's message, as heard by the author and other sources, such as the Scriptures, theologians, and Church documents. There are a great amount of quotations and references in this book in order to gain the fullness of the Spirit's message.

PART ONE: THE BIG PICTURE

Chapter 1: An Incredible Century

The twentieth century was marked by the astounding advancement in knowledge and technology. Fr. M. Philippe believes that this acceleration indicates a nearness to the end of time. Knowledge and technology are wonderful things, but at what price does the world grow smaller? Social advances have been significant, including the respect for the dignity of all men. Modern science also seems to be withdrawing from a completely mechanistic view of the universe.

On the other hand, the twentieth century was the bloodiest of all centuries combined. About 87 million persons have died in wars alone during this period. Two messianic political movements arose, to the anguish of the world. Clergymen have seemed prone to join these movements, and continue to do so, identifying the kingdom of God with political ideology. Environmental pollution and moral pollution seem rampant. The AIDS virus has spread rapidly across the world, as have divorces, abortions, violence, and crimes of many kinds. The sexual standards of television have dropped to shocking levels. The rejection of God and objective truth by our culture is at the root of most of these developments and causes us pain and billions of dollars.

Christian churches have also experienced ups and downs. Communism was the first organized atheistic movement to dominate the world scene and persecute without limit. On the other hand, in Christian lands there has been a massive rejection of Christ, beginning with scripturally skeptic scholars. Strange theological notions have become the fashion (e.g., that Mary was not a virgin, that she was raped, etc.), especially at Catholic universities, and are even giving rise to new "spiritualities" of pantheism and New Age. Pope Paul VI, in 1977, said, "I find myself repeating that obscure phrase of Jesus' in the Gospel of St. Luke: 'When the Son of man comes, will he still find the faith on earth?'" Since 1960 there has been a steady decline in vocations and Mass attendance. Relative affluence has had a spiritually deadening effect. Organized pressure groups have also worked diligently to reduce the Church's impact on the world. On the other hand, missionary activity has been burgeoning as has the Catholic school system. The Church attempted to renew itself through the Second Vatican Council. The Pentecostal movement has had rapid growth.

How can we understand the big picture? Pope Leo XIII, just before the twentieth century, is reported to have had a vision in which Satan was given permission by God to take this century for his own devices. Leo XIII

asked for the St. Michael prayer to be said, which was done until about the time of the Second Vatican Council and for prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first day of the twentieth century, which was the same day the Pentecostal movement was born. The Marian apparitions at Fatima, with their clear references to Russia and Bolshevism, also give a clue to this century's fortunes and misfortunes.

Chapter 2: The Situation of the Catholic Church Today

In North America, there has been a substantial weakening of faith, morality, and mission since Vatican II. Catholic divorces have risen sharply. Catholics disagree heavily with Church teaching on homosexuality, family planning, and even the Eucharist, and reflect this distance from the Church in paltry financial support. Vocations have dropped precipitously. Fr. Benedict Groeschel believes this is "the darkest time in Catholic history and the history of the United States." A large number of Hispanic American Catholics have converted to other religions. There is a minimal evangelistic effort, in contrast, among Catholics themselves. In Canada, a similar decline is evident, with an even more pronounced deterioration in faith and morals, though the non-Catholic conservative evangelical churches in Canada were doing slightly better than the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches. Especially unfortunate is the fall of Quebec, the heavily Catholic portion of the country.

In Latin America, there has been a Protestant explosion to the detriment of the Catholic population. Especially popular are the evangelical denominations. An American priest who visited Guatemala was shocked by the "amount of Protestant proselytizing... The absence of the Catholic Church's presence stunned him." One lone bright spot in Brazil is the growth of some revival movements, such as the charismatic renewal. It may be that the Holy Spirit is using this clear and precipitous decline to turn the Church's focus back to "the basics," namely to Christ and conversion.

In Asia, the Philippines, its only Catholic country, has encountered much the same fate as Latin America. South Korea has experienced remarkable growth in Christianity. India has a healthy Catholic minority, though there is a certain amount of theological confusion, which one cardinal attributes to a misunderstood dialogue with other religions. Notable signs in India include the charismatic renewal and Christian films, and films are also evangelistic in the former Soviet republics. Christianity in China, though persecuted, has survived and grown bravely.

In Africa, the situation is more complex, though the same factors are at work. Northern Africa is under Muslim pressure, though sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a phenomenal growth of Christianity, though in places the Faith seems shallow. Conversion was often seen as a way to get ahead in a white man's world, with true faith and knowledge lagging behind. Lack of community, especially for moral strength, is a problem for both lay and clergy. Many African priests have unofficial wives and families to support. Witchcraft, sorcery, and life with evil spirits are a large part of the African tradition. Protestant denominations, especially in the Pentecostal branch, are achieving striking growth.

In Western Europe, the culture is demonstrably and strikingly de-Christianized. Many persons do not agree with Church teaching, and Mass attendance is shockingly low in almost every Western European country. Ireland's Mass attendance is still relatively high, but this does not necessarily speak to the morals of the people. For the historically fertile soil of Europe, modern statistics speak very poorly.

In Eastern Europe, the Church is still struggling to free itself from ex-Communist influences but great opportunity looms. Poland has experienced a steep decline in Catholics since the youth have discovered Western materialism. Hungary, Lithuania, and other countries are experiencing much the same. Russia has welcomed energetic Protestant sects. The Catholic and Orthodox churches seem to be preoccupied with lesser matters while the Protestants evangelize. The decades of Communism had eroded morality and spirituality deeply. Prayer and conversion are needed badly in the former communist countries.

Chapter 3: The Lifting up of Jesus

The previous bad news is only to better understand the good news of God. A significant demographic shift has taken place in Christianity towards Pentecostal and Evangelical types of denominations and away from Catholicism. Most of the growing denominations are made up of former Catholics, who believe they have never “met” Jesus. The activity of fundamentalists has spurred activity in Biblical learning, catechesis, a pastoral approach, “warmer” liturgies, and the formation of active lay persons. The Catholic Church needs to examine herself and make some broad changes, especially in perception. Various lay movements within the Church may provide the solution due to their Christocentric vision of faith (i.e. back to the basics). Pope John Paul II, in 1991, called the cardinals together to discuss two urgent contemporary issues: abortion and the new religious movements, which expose the pastoral weak points of the Catholic Church. John Paul II has called insistently for a “new evangelization”.

This “new evangelization” does not consist of a new Gospel, but rather is new in ardor, methods, and expression. Much of this movement would be a re-evangelization of lapsed Catholics. Its style would be typified “by what is essential and radical, immersed in the mystery of the dead and risen Christ and courageously open to the needs of modern man.” Fr. Avery Dulles has written about the historical and theological significance of this new evangelization, a movement to which Catholics have not been strongly inclined as of recent centuries. He believes that Vatican Council II refocused the Church on the gospel and evangelization.

A “new Pentecost” must take place in order for the “New Evangelization” to take place. One cannot be a witness to the risen Lord except by encountering him through the Holy Spirit. The charismatic renewal, affecting the Church in nearly every country, is understandably not for everyone, but it exhibits an admirable interest in encountering the risen Lord through the Holy Spirit. Being baptized in the Spirit does not mean that one has been accepted into a movement, but rather embraces the fullness of Christian initiation. The charismatic renewal has some “unusual” elements, such as speaking in tongues, but the baptism in the Spirit is its most important characteristic. When the contemporary charismatic renewal first began in 1967, it was thought by some that the renewal was unnecessary, in comparison to the beleaguered early Christians, but it is clear that modern society is no longer Christian. There are many examples of the Spirit’s manifestations, but the most impressive manifestation of the Spirit is holiness.

Chapter 4: What Is the Spirit Saying?

The Spirit did all the things in the early Church that Jesus had promised, and the Spirit continues to draw the Church’s attention to that which is overlooked. The simple and clear message is that when Jesus is proclaimed clearly and confidently, in the power of the Holy Spirit, many more people come to the Faith and there is much more growth to the Church than when he is not. It is important, as the previous three chapters mentioned, for the Church to undergo an examination of conscience, to make sure that the Holy Spirit is not being ignored by human pride. When humans make grave mistakes (e.g. priests who make immoral choices, tribunals that hand out improperly inspected annulments, clergy pedophilia, poor homilies, Catholic complacency, et cetera), the Church is placed in a trial by fire, which destroys and purifies. Pride is the destroyer of holiness.

Despite problems and weaknesses in many movements nowadays, Martin believes that the Spirit is saying this: The Father is so delighted when His Son is honored and proclaimed, even in theologically weak situations, that He still pours out His Holy Spirit in abundance, for He puts first things first. What is the Spirit saying? *Jesus*.

Chapter 5: The Church, Repentance, and Faith

To be a Catholic means that to believe in Jesus is to be of His church, though not in a solely institutional way. The Church has strongly expressed, time and again, the need for Christians to be bound within the Holy Spirit

and its renewal. But there are some obstacles that stand in the way of clearly hearing the Holy Spirit's message to the Church today. The greatest such obstacle is Catholic pride, that we somehow deserve the gifts we have been given, or gradually come to act as though we control God. This leads to hypocrisy at any level of the Church, and can make religion into a purely man-oriented. When this pride touches the leadership of a church, man's fallen nature takes "control" over the voice of God.

Another tendency is to narrow our conception of God and His plan to simply the group or institution that we belong to, thereby limiting God's action. This makes us possessive and jealous of others sharing the Spirit. God can even use pagan nations to do His will. Even Peter and the early Church struggled against God's plan to save all nations. The Spirit might be saying a Pentecost message: *Repent, believe, and you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Chapter 6: Jesus, Head of the Catholic Church

Jesus is the Lord of all creation, of the entire universe, and as such is clearly also the Head of the Catholic Church. The Church has no meaning or purpose apart from Jesus Christ. Three elements of the Church—the Eucharist, Mary, and the hierarchy—are often difficult to understand, but all are intrinsically Christocentric.

The reality of the encounter with the Lord in the Eucharist was clearly witnessed to in the early Church. The Eucharist is not merely a remembrance, or an "again" sacrifice, but the participation in the one and only sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The shocking statements in John 6 reveal the true nature of the Eucharist, which is the heart of the Mass. The Mass, which is not to be limited to the Eucharist, when described in human language, can have its full meaning obscured. The Eucharist is not meant to restrict our relationship with God to a certain amount of time on a certain day, but to open us to a whole world of prayer and praise and thanksgiving.

The Catholic Church pays special honor to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who is to be honored in the plan of God. Women in general seem to be more responsive to the Lord, even holier. Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe writes that "God created woman to be the mediatrix of love." Even many of the Reformers revered Mary. It is true, however, that some Catholics may exaggerate her role, which is not God's intention. Marian dogmas, even if not found in the Bible, certainly do not contradict what is found in Sacred Scripture. Various Marian apparitions can easily be explained as part of God's plan, as well, since He, as God of the living and not the dead, allowed Moses and Elijah to appear in order to accomplish certain purposes at certain times. The Marian apparitions at Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima are then discussed in detail.

The hierarchy of the Church, though made up of flawed men, was established by Christ to have a leadership role among the believers. But it is a different leadership than that of the world since the hierarchy is not to lord it over others but point them to Jesus. In our century, we have seen a remarkable "purification" of the papacy and the episcopal office, of repudiations of imperial trappings and real estate. Further cleansing and purification is yet necessary. The hierarchy has yet to understand better how "ministry gifts" can be encouraged and used properly in the modern Church. The Church is itself a Sacrament, in that she is an outward sign which points to Christ Himself. As a historical institution, the Church is simply a means, but in her identity as Bride, she is an end. And thus we all, as members of the Church, are to be holy in our personal response to Jesus and in our communal witness to the world.

PART TWO: OUR PERSONAL RESPONSE

Chapter 1: Personal Surrender

We need to continually deepen our understanding of God to keep our relationship with Him a personal one. Catholic “values” without the Person of Christ are meaningless. At the heart of Jesus’ message, especially during the last days of His life, is the desire that His friends come to know God as their Father. Jesus Himself does everything to please the Father, and so the Father commits Himself to Jesus. As Jesus honors the Father, the Father honors Jesus. There is total commitment on both parts. The most useful thing we can do to bring about the reign of Christ over the whole earth is to give ourselves more fully to Him, and this requires an ongoing breaking of pride.

Chapter 2: Faith and the Breaking of Pride

The original “paradise” of man in Eden depended on loving trust between the creature and his Creator. When the first man and woman rose up in their pride to “be like gods”, evil flooded onto earth. This same pride has produced such evils as Aryan superiority and Communism. But God’s plan for salvation cannot happen without pride being broken with the key being faith. Salvation and faith are undeserved gifts from God, given through His Son’s sacrifice on the Cross. In order to break our pride, God designed salvation in the form of an undeserved gift rather than some accomplishment of our own. Pride can cloak itself in various forms: customs and expectations that overshadow the Cross; a “personal” or “spiritual” approach to God that does not submit to divinely ordered authorities as a safeguard against deception; an imbalance between the institutional and the charismatic; the exaggerated self-importance of a particular movement; and the tendency to want to “save oneself”.

Genuine faith expresses itself progressively in a life of morality, prayer, and love for others. Saving faith is a faith that expresses itself in works. There is no conflict between grace and law or between faith and works. In fact, one is more likely to evangelize if one accepts the gift of faith in such realities of heaven and hell, has a personal relationship with Jesus, et cetera. The doctrine of grace is likely the most neglected doctrine today. These fundamental points, such as Jesus being the foundation of everything, must be made explicit in our modern cultures, in order for the rest of our teachings to make sense.

We are all in need of forgiveness and mercy, since we are all trapped in pride of various forms. Whether we have been hardened sinners or not, we are all in need of forgiveness, and we have all been forgiven countless already. To refuse forgiveness, or to refuse to admit our need for forgiveness, is to attempt suicide. St. Paul boasts of his afflictions and weaknesses, since this gives glory to God. It is interesting that when God gives great blessings, He also gives us the means to keep from becoming proud, should we choose to accept them.

Chapter 3: Living in Faith

Why are mainline Protestant churches declining in numbers while biblically conservative nondenominational churches are sprouting in heavy numbers? Because belief, especially belief that one can be saved only through Jesus Christ, is a driving force. Such spiritual conviction is being watered down in the mainline churches. In the Catholic Church, a great effort is being made to professionalize and certify qualified employees and lay persons, but what is really critical is faith! “We get religion at times, but we’re not good at faith.” Bureaucracy is not a suitable substitute for conversion.

What is faith? Faith is a way of knowing and seeing realities that are presently invisible but are of even more importance than the realities we can see with our biological eyes. Faith is solely a gift from God. Scripture has different meanings for faith: “the Faith” as in the deposit of faith handed on; faith as obedience to the truth; faith as trust; faith as surrender, abandonment, and conversion. Another dimension of faith in Scripture is charismatic faith – the faith which works wonders. Faith is our pathway to God and our lifeline. Faith is amply expounded upon in Scripture passages and parables.

In faith, we have been crucified with Christ, and baptism is this initial death and resurrection in him. Faith is therefore daily renewed and relied upon. It is, however, very easy to begin in faith and slide into “works of the law”, or reliance on something other than the very Person of Christ, to drift from faith and become hard-hearted. Satan is most interested in destroying our faith in Christ. Jesus was so concerned about this massive assault on faith that He said, “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?” When one’s faith is being attacked, the only solution is Jesus, who inspires, sustains, and perfects our faith. Thus the Word of God is essential nourishment for our soul.

Chapter 4: The Birth of Hope

A spirit of hopelessness seems to pervade our culture, and our personal atmospheres. In the midst of false hopes, sorrows, tragedies, and shallow relationships, there is really good news: there is hope after all, which is born and nourished through faith in Jesus. Since all of Jesus’ actions were done for us, we can be confident that there is love for us, and thus hope for us. There is a profound link between faith, hope, and love. Faith can be compared to the roots of a plant, hope to the stem, and love to the fruits.

Hope is fundamentally connected to the future: the current assurance of something that will be fully ours if we continue in union with Jesus. The fountain of youth has been, and is still, desperately sought, but for what end? Death and hopelessness will still come unless one is united with Jesus and assured of one’s inheritance of eternal life. Because of this “future-oriented” hope, however, our present is also profoundly changed. A significant study on the link between religious faith and mental health is a good example. Hope gives us strength now to keep on serving, loving, forgiving, praying, and living. But the lynchpin is Jesus Christ – hope in anything else is groundless. Hope is born and grows in much the same manner as faith: Scripture and a personal relationship with the Giver of all Good Gifts.

Chapter 5: The Greatest of These

We exist, even though we do not have to. God, in His great love, brought us out of nothingness, and then gave us a chance at reconciliation through His great sacrifice of love. God’s love is extraordinary and unfathomable. One of the greatest depths of God’s love involves His breathtaking humility, showing respect for our choice to love or reject Him! He does not overwhelm us with His divinity, but comes to us as our own. Mary, an example of humility herself, accepted the humility of God as her own son.

Jesus’ love is so great that He speaks of a “new” Commandment to govern our relationships with each other. Christ’s love was expressed not just in words, but also in deeds, which is an example for our love. The love of God is also completely inclusive and universal. When Jesus warns against judging and condemning, He is of course not ruling out discerning the difference between good and evil. So-called wars of religion that have occurred throughout history are an abomination to the Lord. We are to love all, without compromising what we believe, using as an example the love of St. Francis. On our own, we cannot love like this, but the love of God Himself is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit’s outpouring is also profoundly free and powerful, and consists of many spiritual gifts and charisms. We must set our hearts upon receiving the Holy Spirit’s love and gifts.

Chapter 6: Jesus, Us, and the End of an Age

In all ages, the Church has had difficulties, corruptness, and prideful people. Yet modern evil may well be unique in its technology. An age is coming to an end, the end of seventeen hundred years of Christendom. This may very well be the great apostasy in the world. The sexual revolution, for example, is at its heart a massive rebellion against God. A “brave, new world” without the traditional family is upon us.

But the very evil that men do and God permits contains within it the seeds of redemption. The power at work within the sons and daughters of God will always be greater than the power of evil in the world. Eventually, the truth will win out. Even in the concentration camps of World War II, where evil was so concentrated, tremendous stories of faith and triumph emerge (e.g. St. Maximilian Kolbe). In the dark days about us, a new springtime can already be predicted and seen. And no matter what we humans are concerned about, God is not worried, anxious, or afraid. He is in control, and will see that all things work to the good of those who love him. Even now, the Spirit is being poured out.