

Book Review:

SANDRI Luigi

Anno 2289 L'Ultimo Conclave

(Rome: Guida, 2021), 234 p.

In philosophy, as well as in certain empirical sciences or mathematics, counterfactuals are frequently used to determine the soundness of a hypotheses or theory. One would imagine a possible but not real scenario, to see whether the theory or hypothesis in question works in the counterfactual situation. If in this scenario the hypothesis or theory “holds,” the theory or hypothesis will be established as sound. Luigi Sandri: *Anno 2289 L'Ultimo Conclave* involves such an exercise in relation to certain religious and theological issues; issues that have been topical at least since the Second Vatican Council. These concern how the church ought to be organized, the idea of priesthood, the role/s women ought to play within the Church and, more generally, what changes are desirable and/or possible within the Roman Church, and the manner in which changes ought to occur, for instance, whether change ought to be carried out by an enlightened Pontiff, or whether it ought to start off at grass-roots level.

Just as he did in an earlier book, *Cronache dal Futuro: Zeffirino II e il dramma della sua chiesa*, Sandri places his counterfactual scenario in a not-so-immediate future which, however, in relation to Church matters is strikingly similar to our present and to our immediate past. It is still a Church which rallies from the troubles, tribulations, hopes, expectations, delusions, progress and retractions of the Second Vatican Council (1958 – 1962). The storyline is a thriller involving the events that follow the murder of all electable Cardinals when these locked for the conclave of 2289, after they have been summoned to elect the successor to Pope Francis IV. This plot however, is simply an excuse to discuss the issues mentioned in the first paragraph of this review, and to test a number of hypothesis and suggestions in relation to this.

Sandri draws a scenario where the Pope is dead and all voting Cardinals are wiped out, but where, as a matter of fact, the Church keeps functioning both at local and at global levels. Through the picture he draws, he seems to suggest that these institutions are not necessary for there to be a Church. They do play a role and an important one, but are neither necessary nor sufficient for the Church to exist. Their role is contingent to logistic and historical situations. Their function and the way in which they operate, can and maybe should change in different circumstances and contexts. This is very much in contrast, to clericalist and conservative tendencies within the church, which tend to elevate these roles and the current *modus operandi* to absolute paradigms. Sandri in contrast, seems to implicitly suggest that this cleric-conservative attitude may, in definite circumstances and situations, actually render such institutions an impediment to the Spirit operating within the Church. In the book this is highlighted to the extent that the tragic elimination of the college of cardinals becomes liberatory and creates a context where fecund possibilities abound.

Regarding the manner in which desirable changes ought to happen – whether this ought to be gradual and involving existing structures, or whether it ought to be radical – through the scenario he draws Sandri seems skeptical about the possibility of the former. Even though the plot unfolds 327 years after the Second Vatican Council, and despite four Popes named Francis, the Church's structures, limits and blind alleys are the still ones the Church has been grappling with in our present and immediate past. Sandri seems to suggest that the only possible way of seriously reforming the Church is “bottom-up.” There needs to be a radical break. In the book's storyline, even Cardinals without the right to vote who want to bring about a radical change and who have not been murdered because they were not participating at the Conclave, have to break away from their conservative colleagues and seek alliances with grassroots movements, in order to steer the Church towards the future they envisage. These passages are obviously both a commentary on the reforms Pope Francis has been seeking to enact since his election, and a warning/suggestion regarding the routes he ought (not) to follow and the alliances he should be build. For Sandri Pope Bergoglio needs to throw away the instruction manual, and seek ways, paths, and avenues, not traditionally envisaged for the office he occupies to push forward his agenda.

In his book, Sandri, an active member of the San Paolo Base Community in Rome, draws a lively and healthy picture of the Church at grass-roots level. The book gives the impression that, in contrast to the cumbersome Vatican machinery, the grassroots Christian phenomena to which the author refers can offer both the novel wine and the new wineskins the Church requires. They can

also offer a mooring-light in relation to trajectory along which Peter's successor should steer the Ship he is captaining.

One shortcoming of this scenario is that the pushes from "below" that might tilt the balance for a genuine and progressive change, are pushes that come almost exclusively from the city of Rome itself, or at best from Italy, even if, by our standards today, they are multi-ethnic in nature. One does not read about other grassroots activity from outside Italy. The book does refer to individuals – primarily prelates – who are not Italians, and who play an important role in the plot. Yet, it fails to refer to non-Italian grass-root communities. This seems to be an important limit of the narrative. The Church that seems to be represented in the work is primarily Italian and Roman rather than universal and ... catholic.

Moreover, the book does not represent any grass-root mass reaction by the conservative Church to initiatives by progressive Cardinals and base communities. No such reaction is described, even though conservative and reactionary groups within or around the Catholic Church have grown in the post-Conciliar years, and are organized and have great means of mobilizing sympathizers. To be fair Sandri does mention such grass-root conservative phenomena. But in the story these do not seem able to constitute, or at least to attempt to constitute, any bulwark of sorts against the progressive tide. This immobility seems highly unrealistic. The conservative quarters that in the book seek to stem the change do not operate from "the ground." They are forces that operate "from above"; from within institutions. Will they succeed? Or will they be swept apart by the Spirit?

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