

What was Cardinal Martini thinking?

Robert McClory | Sep. 6, 2012 NCR Today

I noted with interest the many *NCR* readers who were either disappointed or angry that Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini [chose to speak out](#) [1] so candidly and scathingly about the state of the church only when he lay close to death. And I was immediately reminded of another insightful thinker who also revealed his convictions in print just before his death.

The stories of both bare certain similarities.

In the 16th century, the Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus, on the basis of mathematics and the most up-to-date scientific evidence, determined that the earth is one among a number of planets that turn on their axes and move in orbits around the sun. He realized his conclusions were in direct conflict with biblical statements, the unanimous testimony of the church fathers and the teachings of various popes. The official church position held that the earth was the unmoving center of the solar system, around which the sun, moon, planets and stars all circulated. So Copernicus delayed publication of his work until he was on his deathbed. He was clearly afraid the teaching authority of the church would descend, label him a heretic and turn him over to the Inquisition. Who was he to contradict this church that teaches with certitude, expects submission and resents contradiction?

So his findings lay ignored for 23 years until one day in 1609, when a professor at the University of Padua in Italy, Gaileo Galilei, looked into one of those new-fangled inventions called telescopes and realized almost instantly that here was the evidence proving Copernicus right. But unlike Copernicus, Galileo wrote treatises and books about what he saw, despite the likely repercussions. He tried to soften the impact of these discoveries by suggesting that certain statements in the Bible should not be taken literally and that traditions that have never been tested or debated are subject to critical scrutiny and even revision. Eventually, the Inquisition did descend on him. He was charged with teaching heresy, forced to recant and sentenced to permanent house arrest. But by then, the horses were out of the barn. The doctrine of a sun-centered solar system would prevail, and only the most uneducated would cling to the certitudes of old.

Now comes Cardinal Martini with his very brief "spiritual testament." The church, he said, is "200 years out of date," old, tired and in need of a "radical transformation beginning with the Pope and his bishops." He called for a change in the policy on divorce and remarriage: "Unless the church adopts a more generous attitude towards divorced persons, it will lose the allegiance of future generations," he said. And he suggested the church is so hung up on sexual issues that people no longer see her as an "authoritative reference," but a "caricature in the media."

Martini had long been a progressive voice among the college of cardinals, but, like Copernicus, he waited almost until the end before becoming so outspoken. Was his motive personal fear of retaliation, or was he perhaps hoping to trouble the minds of others in high places in the church, people he knows who agree with him wholeheartedly but remain silent in order to maintain their blameless careers amid the church's growing "bureaucratic apparatus" with, as Martini says, "our rites and our dress [that are] pompous"?

Was he reaching out to some like-minded colleagues from within the institution, even in the upper reaches of the Vatican, who, like him, have grown weary of the endless retrenchment, the reform of the reform and the insistent papal drumbeat of gloom and negativity? Was Martini hoping for a fearless Galileo, or maybe several, for this age and in this dire situation? God knows, at some point and at some time, there has to be a breakthrough and a sharp turn in the direction of the institutional Catholic church. May Carlo Maria Martini live on as a prophet of the coming new age.

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