

# Ivan Illich

## **The Powerless Church and Other Selected Writings, 1955–1985**

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# How Will We Pass on Christianity?

Ivan Illich, "How Will We Pass on Christianity?," *The Critic* 30, no. 3 (1972): 14–20.

After four years of silence imposed on me—which I accepted—because of an article I wrote for *The Critic* ["The Vanishing Clergyman," June–July 1967], I am very happy to open my mouth again to address, more or less directly, the problems which face the Church which I love. The article to which I refer was meant to be the first of two: the first was concerned with the sacrament of Holy Orders, and the second, in a somewhat analogous way, with the sacrament of Matrimony. The second article I tore up and will not publish. It's rather an emotional thing for me, here in the forum of *The Critic*—which is a responsible forum and one which I regard most highly in the United States—to break the silence which I wanted to keep on matters of the Church. So let us begin in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

How can Christianity be handed on? How can Faith be handed on? I will begin with the first of five issues which I want to raise: with the problem of what the reading, the public reading, the public voicing of the traditional written word has been transformed into today.

I am now forty-five. I was born into a Church that was forty-five years younger than she is today. I was taught, for instance, to humble myself publicly, very ritually, without any sense of guilt, yet with the knowledge that I had done something wrong when in a choir stall I sang half a note off. I threw ashes on my head for having mispronounced a word or sung a false note. I also always immensely enjoyed the detailed rubrics of the liturgy: not because they gave me security, but because they permitted me to renew the deep sense of responsibility that I took in saying again words which were spoken and pronounced always in the same way (even though I might have been somewhat embarrassed or annoyed

at the baroque quality of the liturgy of our Western Church during the time in which I grew up). I was certain that the framework of a constant, never-changing liturgy provided the minister with the base which he needed for celebrating—in other words for saying today's Mass precisely according to yesterday's rules and yet in every detail subtly, visibly *not* yesterday's, but today's unique performance. What is true about music and about the sacred dance is true also about the reading of the Gospel. There is an advantage to knowing, for instance, that on every seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost the same Gospel comes up again. And yet each year he who reads it aloud will read it with the consciousness that he gives it a different intonation: that it means something new. There was a creative tension between taking these near-ossified (I'm not saying completely ossified), very rigid rules which one observes for the gratuitous pleasure of observing an act of commemoration, and the responsibility for making these words, these acts, these sounds something uniquely of today.

When I grew up, we could experience as a matter of course, as a matter of joy, and most of the time as a matter of self-deprecation and suffering the meaning of sacred gesture, sacred music and sacred readings. These things—sacred music, sacred acting, declamation of sacred texts—seemed to me like the living bones and arteries around which and through which constantly renewing life could develop. And it is here that we confront the first difficulty in handing on the Faith today: the people to whom we hand it, who are fifteen, twenty, thirty years younger and yet fully as rational and adult as a man of forty-five—these young people do not have the same experience which we shared.

The point came home again today when someone told me that their children will soon hear their first Latin Mass, because it was announced that such a Mass would be celebrated—as one probably formerly celebrated an Ethiopian Mass—in their parish church. It came home three weeks ago in a different way when I attended a marvelous philosophical conference (very quiet, very English) in Cyprus. I had a day free after the meeting and cabled to Rome to an old friend of mine who now runs a residence in which I had lived for five to six years in the very heart of old Black-Vatican Rome. He arranged for a dinner and invited a gang of

fifteen or so former classmates and colleagues of mine. Before dinner we celebrated Mass. The others vested; as a matter of principle I did not vest and also abstained from official participation as the president of the celebration. There were only eight of us around the altar and suddenly the president of this oldest residence in Rome made the Sign of the Cross in Italian. Now I had worked with kids in Italy, poor kids and we said the Rosary. I love the Rosary. But in Italy the Rosary is normally said in Latin. And here the president of the oldest of Italian colleges begins with the Sign of the Cross in Italian! Now I speak Italian but I never learned how to recite the prayers of the Mass in Italian and what amazed me was that seven men, five of whom are medieval scholars who speak Latin more fluently than Italian, would not have noticed that another man present, a foreigner, couldn't recite the prayers of the Mass with them. So when we came to the Our Father and the president said *Oremus*, I said: *Nunc lingua Latina*.

I hope it is quite clear that I'm not suggesting that we go back to regularly reciting prayers in a language which nobody in the United States understands. I'm only trying to highlight the first very serious reason why it is difficult to hand on the Faith to the next generation. To do so, I do believe that it's necessary to rediscover the beauty in ritual performance of traditional festivities.

I don't object in any way, nor do I belittle the value of going back to the study of St. Jerome's original text of the Vulgate in an attempt to know the Church as she really was. Nor do I suggest or mean to say that we cannot come much closer to the Lord by trying, with all the means which modern science places at our disposal, to study what we call "the true sayings of the Lord," in order to get closer to Christ as he lived. I'm saying simply that the Vulgate version of old, be it called that of St. James or that of the Tridentine, or the vulgar—truly vulgar—texts approved today by the bishops' council or conference of any given country, does provide me in fact with a glorious opportunity to embrace the Church as she now visibly is, as she is visibly incarnate, and that the simultaneous search which proceeds in every celebration of Christians meeting together should be renewing the Faith. That we are not continuing this tradition even while adding new form and new substance is one of the

very serious obstacles to handing on the Faith at this moment in Church history.

There is a second serious difficulty in handing on the Faith, and that is that we are perhaps too concerned with insuring what the future will be like. Corporations and other formalized institutions have taken over many of the functions in the modern world which were formerly performed by families or community groupings. We have grown rather used to this and now are willing to pass on most of the responsibilities and functions which a man and woman took on when they procreated children, to "George," to an institution to take care of. Let the Church do it!

Once, when I spoke about the deinstitutionalization of values as being the principle task of the 70s in all areas of life, a black girl (she could not have been more than thirteen or fourteen) got up and said to me, "Oh, you mean that 'Let George do it' means there ought to be an institution which takes care of that sick man—there ought to be a profession which does it." This applies also to the Church, and is a major difficulty in handing on the Faith. The future of the Church is in God's hands. I am responsible only for *my* and *our* past, not for the future of the Church. You must understand, and come to understand anew, that the density of the Incarnation, the only time the Lord is present to us, is at the present moment which we celebrate together.

We can speak about the Church in the past tense and we can enjoy her as Mother, as Spouse, and as a corrupt woman—a prostitute—in the present, accepting her gratefully, joyfully, shamefully, recognizing ourselves as what we are: sons of *that* kind of a woman. But only in the present; only in the present the Lord redeems her. We have no idea if there is a future. To live as a Christian means to live in the spirit of the *Maran Atha*—the Lord is coming at this moment. It means to live and to enjoy living at the edge of time, at the end moment of time.

And here we come to the first of several convergences which I want to mention to you. Never, except probably for a few moments in history, such as around the time of the outbreak of the Crusades, have so many people been so convinced that the end of the world is at hand; not because the Lord has foretold it, but because all the evidence points to it (today we call it scientific evidence; then it was astrological

evidence)—that there might not be a 1984, that we might not arrive at it. We, as Christians, living the spirit of the original Church, and living with a theological interpretation of what it means to celebrate the presence of the Lord, can therefore evangelize the mood of the end of time which is as strong today as it has ever been in recent epochs or generations. After all, we know what it is to gather for a gallows meal—every Mass we celebrate is a memory of such a last meal, the sort they give a condemned prisoner before execution. That is the mood in which the first Mass was celebrated and it will not be celebrated again in quite the same spirit until we celebrate it together in the kingdom of the Father.

I do not see any way we can hand on the Faith unless we hand it on right now and here, in the present, and cease to worry about the institutions we have to create so as to make sure of—to insure—the form the Faith will take in the year 1975 or 1980. So, just as I suggested to you that the first difficulty in handing on the Faith today is finding out how to give value again to the speaking and communication of the old written word, in performing meaningful ritual which separates but enhances form and substance, so I suggest that the second one is not to worry about what will happen to the Faith of tomorrow but to make ourselves fully and totally responsible at this moment in the *memoriali mortis Domini*—the remembrance of the death meal, the gallows meal.

A third difficulty connected with handing on the Faith at the present time is related to the issue of renunciation. During the early 60s a strange mood of this-worldly optimism overcame Catholics, especially Catholic religious. They wanted to find positive meaning in their vows.

I remember giving an eight-day retreat in Milwaukee to a group of religious superiors—it must have been in 1964. I remember pointing out that the three vows really represented the three great dimensions of renunciatory self-definition. Poverty, which I always define as the fear of God, a guiding principle in my life; a fear of God which says, “Never, never let anything get between me and you.” For this reason I want to live as detached from things in this beautiful, glorious world as everybody will have to be detached from them and from it at the moment of death. Secondly, obedience. I will always accept autonomy, the surprising autonomy, the non-justified obligations of the person whom I am with,

because only the profoundest respect for his otherness will obligate me to constantly search my own autonomy and to affirm it. Thirdly, chastity: the tremendous self-definition implied in saying, "I know I'm living at the edge of time, at the end of time; I love but it is a love for which I cannot assume responsibility; nor do I want commitments here because I know what the projections are; or better, I believe it in the darkness which faces me at the hour of death."

Now at that time I was pretty much surprised at the overwhelming majority of the superiors there, responsible as they were for the formation of sisters, who objected very strongly to such a negative interpretation of what it meant to be radically, completely committed according to a very special vocation within the Church. I do believe that the time is dawning again when many Christians realize the implications of identifying with the crucified Lord, with him who was truly man, believed truly in an omnipotent God, and made himself totally subject to a gallows.

What I find sad in connection with what we have discussed in the first and second points is that many of those of us who are inculcated with certain habits and disciplines and the tradition of renunciation from the pre-Vatican II Church—before the eruption of the therapeutic imperative into the Church's life—are today almost ashamed of handing on to others who want and demand it the very disciplines and traditions in which we were brought up.

It seems as if we sought the visibility of the Church either in new political forms, or as if we wanted to renounce a visible Church in order to be able, like so many Protestants, to imagine that we could belong to a Church of our own choosing in order not to have to admit that we are sons of a visible bitch. (This is a theological statement and I wish I had time to elaborate it. But I strongly recommend the reading of the Urs von Balthazar's *Casta Meretrix*, which cost me an awful lot when I got into trouble asking somebody to translate it six years ago.)

By now it is really a question, if we want to hand on the Church, of rediscovering those elements through which the church finds its present visibility among us—those ways by which the mystery becomes tangible; in other words, by which the Incarnation in the social and communal order takes place. And, in order to be able to do this—to search for what

is really permanently visible within the Church—we must be capable of freeing ourselves from certain old images which made us believe that the Church must be visible according to the mode of a state or of a political entity.

Now, as I told you at the beginning, I want to formulate questions. I want to call your attention to directions in which I do truly believe that we have to search for what makes it so difficult, suddenly, to hand on the Faith. On this particular point, forgive me for being so terribly traditional. I was never afraid of saying what I think, but I want always to say that I think it *within* the Church. I have no idea if within our own generation the Church will find it possible as a community to say yes to what I now suggest—and I want only to suggest it. But we have sought the visibility of the Church basically in political models. We believe that the Church is in some way instituted as a godlike Byzantine court, or later on as a medieval, feudal system of fiefs. At this very moment it seems to me that those who are more conservative within the Church are trying to say that since neither the first nor the second model really works, the Church's visibility should be imagined along the lines of a constitutional monarchy. Thus, the current discussion about the fundamental law—*lex fundamentalis*—which the bishops sought to have discussed during the recent synod in Rome. I'll come back to this because I think there is a fourth model which is now considered very advanced by certain groups of people who oppose the old models and who would like to give the Church visibility, in the form of a service institution, the visibility of something like a world-wide school system or de-schooled educational system which would transmit faith about the world outside of life within the world, as all educational systems give education outside real reality about "a reality" in which you can live only after you have consumed this education. I suggest that we should, during these next ten years, see if it is not possible that everything which we believe and which the Church has taught us to believe essentially about the visibility of the Church could not be applied to the visibility of certain behavioral patterns in prayer.

For this reason, I'll tell you what I would like to do personally during the second half of this decade. I would like to work with a group of people at filling out a matrix listing in one direction certain forms of



behavior which in the old way I would identify as explicitly formal prayer forms, such as silence, or waking at night, or abstention or good gourmet eating on certain occasions, feasting or even orgiastic behavior, or common recitation of poems. And along the other line of this matrix, I would like to list certain high points in great religious movements; from certain moments in Sufism, or in Jewish mystic traditions to the period of Lyrae, or the end of the eleventh century, or even in a certain Baroque movement, and see how, in the search for the presence of God, perhaps all over the world, people happen to come back to give the same structural form to their community—a form of voluntarily chosen behavior adapted in order to advance the true presence of the Lord to themselves. The aim would be to see if we could not seek the visibility of the Church in the conscious evangelical interpretation of prayer rather than in the evangelical interpretation of some political or organizational structure. For it is this problem of failing visibility that I see as the third difficulty in handing on the Faith today.

A fourth difficulty is the profound divorce which seems to have taken place between what used to occupy Christians and what occupies them today—between Christians conscious of tradition and these same men when they stand now ready to engage in the political struggle to defend the rights of their brothers or fight against oppression. I believe that this difficulty can be overcome only if we show a convergence of two movements: social criticism, which is truly radical, and Christian prophecy which is independent and free. I therefore believe that the fourth difficulty in handing on the Faith today is the apparent divorce between social criticism and the Christian message.

I believe that the reason for this divorce and lack of convergence is a lack of sufficiently deep radicalism on the part—not only of Christians—but of most people today who are engaged in political movements. They are not radical enough in their social criticism on the one hand and on the other they lack the courage to make that which is most fundamental in the Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, the principal theme of their prophecies.

Let me give one simple example. In social criticism one of the great ideals of a socialist (and I don't like to use the word in the U.S. at the

moment because I am not sure precisely what it means here) is that of the social control of the mode of means of production which prevails in a given society. I think that most people who speak about the social control of the mode of production are simply not radical enough because social control of production in a very advanced technological society does not mean just two things, but three; and the third is generally neglected. Social control means, first, control of the capital or the means of production. Secondly, it means control of the mechanisms of distribution. But it also means a third thing which hasn't been so widely recognized during the past fifty years. It means voluntarily to impose limits to certain technological dimensions in the product. And, unless it is aware of this need to impose limitations of this nature on the product, I don't believe that any social criticism which the new world-wide left has developed can be valid or radical.

At present, we conceive of political activity as common agreement as to the minimum which one must guarantee to all people in a society in order to make it possible for them to live. That minimum is always conceived as an institutional output that is inevitably a commodity: so much education, so much health, so much food, so much land, or whatever. By setting minimums as our goals for political programs and action, we inevitably construct different levels, depending on how rich a society is, of launching platforms on which all people labor to get a few men off the pad—a true inversion of political realities.

Politics which would be truly critical and aimed at the realization of a socialist society inevitably must be concerned with setting maximums. It is quite evident, to give an example (and you can check the figures for yourself if you do not believe me), that the amount of time the average member of a society spends in traveling is directly proportional to the speed at which he can travel. That is, the faster the people in a society can go, the more time they lose in transportation. Another example for which I was just recently given very scientific and detailed proof of something I had long believed: after certain point, any further expenditure on medicine means a more prolonged and more painful terminal torture for the person we are endeavoring to save. And in my recent writing I hope to have launched at least some discussion about the evidence that

after a number of years—or perhaps Jefferson's three years—more education inevitably means more overdetermined impotent human beings. And, I make argument in the service sector that increased production after a certain point increases unwanted by-products much faster than it increases desired benefits—something that the environmentalists have been realizing in the past three or four years.

From all of this it is evident, to me at least, that social criticism which does not seek majority agreement on the roof of technological characteristics under which a society wants to live and be happy, cannot be radical—and this opposed to minimum standards. And I believe that social criticism will have to go in this direction in the next few years. And this in itself will be to the tremendous advantage of those we are interested in handing on the Faith.

Because for the first time in history, and I give you only one of the Beatitudes as an example, one will be able to give scientific proof that “blessed are the poor” who voluntarily set community limits to what shall be enough and therefore good enough for our society. Blessed are the poor, because theirs is the earth. Therefore, I do believe, to repeat myself once again, that the fourth difficulty in handing on the Faith is the divorce between true, ultimate and uniquely Christian preoccupations and social criticism which can be overcome only by radicalizing both of them.

Now we come to the fifth of the difficulties. It is related to overcoming the industrial mode of production which has infiltrated the Church. Only a short while ago, people considered the parish as the place where it was determined *for* everybody who belonged what rituals they must perform. It was a place where one could *attend* Mass. Or the place where one could get *direction* from a professional trained in such matters as how to behave in certain circumstances which touched one's faith or one's morals. Or, where one could get the blessings, and during the past ten or fifteen years, the pastoral counseling or other therapeutic, pseudo-therapeutic services and commodities which one did not want to get on the general market (but which one had to get packaged in Catholicism or a trustworthy facsimile stamped with the seal of approval of the chancery office).

Essentially we can see that during the last few decades people have come to view the Church as one more service institution. Which is not so

surprising in an industrial society in which all goods can be mass-produced according to international standards; in which services also began to be produced by professionals in professionally standardized institutions providing health, social welfare—and a Church providing religious services. It is important that we understand that people who are most concerned today with how to hand on the faith are usually concerned with how to make the Church produce those intangible commodities, those institutional outputs which we can now program by re-writing the catechism or standardizing the law to make sure that future output will still be Catholic, will still produce Catholics.

In this the Church is caught in the same bind in which the educational system is caught. In fact, one of my reasons for studying and writing about educational matters was to provide an analysis, a comparison for what has happened to the Church: to see the peculiar form, the degraded form of a world-wide obligatory school system which the Church has become. There is no possibility of handing on a Faith through an institution which is designed in an industrial, managerial mode of production. Just as in the field of education, we have to ask ourselves how we can provide people who want to learn with the books, the encounters, the opportunities they need to learn while actually living a meaningful life rather than doing what we now do—provide packaged teaching, something called education (it's really a form of secularized grace) for people.

So we must ask ourselves how we can provide the things, the events, the people to which somebody called by the Lord needs access if he wants to approach Christ, leaving it up to the Lord to show those who come after us how these things happened in our generation. In short, we must abandon in this case the ideal of both the social scientists and the Marxists of being able to write the history for the future in the present.

The fifth difficulty, therefore, which I find in transmitting the Faith today is the industrial mode and structure, the funnel-like structure which the Church has assumed in order to provide or service us with the Faith—a structure which is precisely opposite to that which would create an atmosphere of freedom in which people who want to approach the Lord know that they can celebrate the encounter with the “other” in a

very traditional and therefore very trivial form which is itself open to the new. Accordingly, the parish or whatever takes its place, must become the place, the moment, the space which we, by common agreement, reserve in this passing, changing world for the commemoration of the Lord—a place, a space, for seeing, as much as we can, how we extend the tradition in which this commemoration is performed.

Let me conclude with the prayer I said this morning in lieu of the reading from the breviary. (For those who don't think that one can substitute other things for the breviary I can only note that the Bishop of Cuernavaca told some of us many years ago: "Well, you can also recite some good poetry.") It is a poem that comes from the Stone Age (in Mexico the Neolithic Age lasted until the coming of Cortez). It comes from the Nahuatl Aztec language in which a third of all word roots refer to flowers and it is directed at a God who is the God in whom all have consciousness. That's what his name means; but it also means: "In whose juice all of us grow." You can choose whichever translation you like, but it is directed to *that* God and it says:

Oh, only for so short a while you have loaned us to each other.  
 Because we take form in your act of drawing us,  
 And we take life in your painting us,  
 And we breathe in your singing us.  
 But only for a short while have you loaned us to each other,  
 Because even a drawing cut into crystalline obsidian fades,  
 And even the green feathers, crown feathers of the quetzal bird lose their color,  
 And even the sounds of the waterfall die out in the dry season.  
 So we, too, because only for a short while have you loaned us to each other.