



Essays on Apologetics  
Volume III

*Quarrels within the Church*

*by Dr. Jeffrey Mirus*

A Catholic Culture publication.

# Essays in Apologetics, Vol. III

## Quarrels within the Church

by Jeffrey A. Mirus Ph.D.

Brief essays on the proper understanding of the Catholic Faith, directed primarily toward the resolution of unfortunate divisions within the Church caused by misconceptions and errors among Catholics themselves.

Trinity Communications  
CatholicCulture.org  
P.O. Box 582  
Manassas, VA 20108

© Copyright Trinity Communications 2012

Book ID: EA3-QWC-JAM

The chapters of this book appeared first on the Trinity Communications website, [CatholicCulture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org).

Our website includes many more Catholic materials, including daily news, commentary, liturgical year resources, Church documents, reviews, and collections of historic Catholic writings and references. You can also sign up for daily and weekly email newsletters.

Trinity Communications is a non-profit corporation. If you would like to support our work, please register and contribute on the website; or mail a check or money order along with your email address to Trinity Communications, P.O. Box 582, Manassas, VA 20108, USA.

We look forward to seeing you at [www.catholicculture.org](http://www.catholicculture.org).

# Table of Contents

Introduction to Apologetics Volume 3 .....	6
SETTING THE STAGE .....	8
Converting the Average Catholic .....	9
Basic Truths? .....	11
Style and Substance: A Confusion of Targets .....	15
AUTHORITY .....	19
Authority and the Logic of Revelation .....	20
The Nature of Infallibility .....	24
Today's False Teachers .....	31
MODERNISM .....	33
Escape from Theological Minimalism .....	34
Theology by Happenstance .....	40
The One and Only Theological Impasse .....	47
Continuing in Austria: Modernist Abuse of Vatican II .....	54
The Cautionary End of the Spirit of Vatican II .....	57
TRADITIONALISM .....	65
On Waffling, Tradition, and the Magisterium .....	66
Conflicting Teachings of the Magisterium? .....	70
Drinking the Kool Aid on Vatican II .....	74
The Assent Owed to Vatican II .....	80
Pope Paul VI on Vatican II .....	83
SOCIAL TEACHING .....	87
Doctrine and Policy: The Authentic Catholic Mind .....	88
Shooting the Messenger: What the Church teaches about her own authority .....	90
Splitting social and life issues? Can't do it. ....	94
Subsidiarity within the Church? .....	98
SCRIPTURE .....	100
The Catholic Approach to Scripture .....	101
Benedict's Second Volume and the Historical Critical Method .....	106
Ratzinger's Gift: Faith-Filled Exegesis .....	110
MISCELLANY .....	113
A bourgeois solution to ordaining women .....	114
Ex Corde Ecclesiae in America .....	116

Ecumenism: The Conversion Question .....	122
Attacking Transubstantiation .....	127
Salvation for Non-Catholics: Not a New Idea .....	129
Salvation for Non-Catholics and Limbo .....	132
ENRICHMENT .....	134
Theological Fidelity .....	135
What Does it Mean to Be Saved? .....	137
None So Blind: Obedience is an Antidote to Stupidity .....	142
Success and Failure in the Church .....	145
Grace and Rationalization: Closely Linked .....	148
Doctrine, Discipline and Holiness: Not Always What They Seem .....	150
The Catholic Side of Salvation .....	155

# Introduction to Apologetics Volume 3

May 04, 2012

There are a great many aspects of Catholic apologetics, an endeavor which may be briefly defined as giving reasons for the hope that is in us (1 Pet 3:15)—that is, offering an explanation and defense of the Faith to those who are presently indisposed to believe. Apologetics is also very useful for Catholics who wish to understand more thoroughly the meaning and grounds of their Faith, but in general it is to be distinguished from evangelization, catechesis and theological study.

The field of apologetics includes arguments aimed to convince someone of some truth of the Faith, as well as efforts to engage the emotions in order to persuade, and also to create a bond of trust with an audience. Classically, these three elements are referred to as *Logos*, *Pathos* and *Ethos*. In all of this, a large part of the task of apologetics is to clear away the impediments to faith, not only rational impediments but those that are not strictly rational, but may be determined in part by our culture or our passions.

In addition to these elements, the members of every audience, whether one or many, must be approached according to what they already know and believe, including what they only think they know (that is, their particular errors), and the prejudices which hold them back as well as the interests and concerns which motivate them. On the other side, too, there is a constant need to purify motives, to appreciate the good in others, and to grow in grace, so that the apologist himself might be a more fit instrument for the action of God in the heart of each potential believer.

Finally, just beyond the ordinary horizons of apologetics lie serious questions about our conception of truth, our appreciation of the importance of the mind's conformity to reality, and our need to suspend a reflexive faith in the dominant opinions (and bad habits) of our culture so that we can engage Revelation with a clear and open mind. All of these, and more, provide fertile ground for apologetical research and practice.

For the past nine years, I have been writing brief essays on CatholicCulture.org. These have appeared under various sectional headings, but are now published as they appear in both my *On the Culture* blog and our section for longer commentaries, called *In Depth Analysis*. These pieces are not generally written with a view toward the cohesiveness of a book, but over time enough of them coalesce under various topics so that providing the more relevant essays all together in one place becomes a significant

convenience.

Out of roughly a thousand such essays, there are at least two hundred which can be classed as at least highly relevant to the field of apologetics. Of these 200, I have chosen for this third collection those essays which primarily address the failure of Catholics to grasp the implications of their own faith, and especially certain divisions which haunt the Church. A first volume already addresses preliminary considerations, such as the disposition of the apologist, how we think, and the way the human person responds to and arrives at truth. A second focuses on arguments directed toward those who are not yet Catholic. Not part of this series is another highly relevant book on the particular moral issues which so plague our culture at the present time. It is perhaps unnecessary to observe that all of these areas overlap; they cannot be rigidly separated.

All of the chapters in this collection first appeared on CatholicCulture.org between 2004 and 2012, but they are here organized topically rather than chronologically. My hope is that this more unified presentation will prove to reinforce the main points of the various subjects covered, while also making particular points easier to find, both initially and when looking back. It goes without saying that I submit everything written here to the judgment of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, presided over by the Vicar of Christ Himself in Rome—that same Church which I so ardently desire all men and women to enter as their one true home, in a world which is otherwise passing away.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=962>

# SETTING THE STAGE

# Converting the Average Catholic

October 28, 2008

In his outstanding book [Render unto Caesar](#), Archbishop Charles Chaput describes the utterly miserable state of Catholic life in the United States: “By our actions, many of us witness a kind of practical atheism: paying lip service to God, but living as if he didn’t exist. Many of us don’t really believe we need a savior. In fact, we don’t see anything we need to be *saved from*.”

This is certainly true; it is even more true because our culture has carefully taught Catholics to appear as mainstream as possible if they want to get ahead; and, in any case, such problems are typical of the affluent, who so often substitute material acquisition for spiritual growth. But lest you think this is a new problem, consider the telling quotation Archbishop Chaput has found from Fr. John Hugo, a retreat master writing in 1947:

...even in the case of those who are wholly faithful to the external obligations of religion, there is often little evidence, aside from their devotions, that they are living Christian lives. Large areas of their lives are wholly unilluminated by their faith. Their ideas, their attitudes, their views on current affairs, their pleasure and recreations, their tastes in reading and entertainment, their love of luxury, comfort and bodily ease, their devotion to success, their desire of money, their social snobbishness, racial consciousness, nationalistic narrowness and prejudice, their bourgeois complacency and contempt of the poor: In all these things they are indistinguishable from the huge sickly mass of paganism which surrounds them.

Few people would deny, I think, that the average self-described American Catholic continues to be largely indistinguishable from his non-Catholic and even pagan neighbors. Statistics on both the public and private behavior of Catholics as a group—voting patterns, divorce, abortion, contraception—amply bear this out. Worse still, to some degree, this problem has always existed. Apparently it does not take much superficial comfort to dissuade the human person from thinking hard about moral and spiritual realities. Whenever we’re too comfortable or can otherwise distract ourselves, it becomes easy to imagine that everything is just fine. Even sin doesn’t seem particularly problematic. Why stir up trouble?

So the average American Catholic is far too content with his mediocre life. And

that's also true of the average European Catholic, the average Asian Catholic, the average Latin American Catholic, the average African Catholic, and every other average Catholic. This problem is endemic to human nature, and there is not a single thing we can do about it. For it is utterly impossible to reach the "average Catholic" anywhere or at any time. The average Catholic is well on his way to Hell in a hand basket. It is beyond difficult to formulate a strategy to head him off at the pass. It is impossible.

On the other hand, there is no sense despairing over our inability to convert a fiction. For the average Catholic does not exist. We may cheerfully abandon the average Catholic to his equally non-existent average fate and instead take a hard look at the spiritual impact of our words, actions, habits and lives on the few real and unique Catholics (and others) whom God has placed us in a position to influence. I don't say that this will make us more comfortable. Personally, I much prefer excusing myself (with unassailable logic) for my inability to do anything whatsoever about the "average Catholic". But a proper focus on real persons makes one huge difference: Even if we feel worse, there is something we can do about it.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=298>

# Basic Truths?

November 18, 2010

Archbishop Rowan Williams recently commented on the *basic truths* of Christianity. In a recent interview on Vatican Radio concerning the new Anglican Ordinariate, the head of the Anglican Communion had this to say about the differences that divide Christians:

Christians are drawn closer together than in any other circumstances when they face persecution—in Iraq, Pakistan, Indonesia, Orissa, or Rajasthan, Christians under pressure don't have the luxury of waiting to stand together until they've sorted everything out. I [recently] met firsthand with a number of people on the receiving end of violence—a woman who'd seen her husband tortured to death in front of her for refusing to abandon his Christian faith—that's simply a moment when you realize what the basic truths are.

But this idea of “basic truths” must be handled with great caution. It is reminiscent of C. S. Lewis' emphasis on “mere Christianity”, something which has become continually “more mere” ever since. In the Christian faith, what constitutes a truth that is basic? Are there any truths that are not basic? Are there some parts of the Christian faith which are optional or which ought not really to cause any separation or distinction among Christians?

## **Screwing Your Courage to the Sticking Point**

Persecution has a wonderful way of drawing people with differences together only if they are being persecuted by the same group. The principle is well-known: Enemies of enemies are friends. Under persecution, people facing the same extreme hazard may well appreciate each other more despite their differences, or may even set aside their differences to concentrate more effectively on the crisis at hand.

It is also true that persecution is a marvelously clarifying experience. As persecution ratchets up, you have to decide whether you are fundamentally committed to your faith or not. If you are, you may find in the midst of the fire that your petty reservations about this or that Christian teaching are just that—petty, selfish, and essentially unimportant.

I don't say that this would be the case if you were a fully-committed member of a particular denomination which differed on some doctrinal point from some other

denomination. But if you were drifting along with a newish movement within your ecclesial communion, a movement driven primarily by the fresh confusions of the popular culture, then persecution might well bring you up short simply by clarifying your priorities. If you were a Catholic insisting on the rightness of contraception or the ordination of women, or if you were an Anglican insisting on the episcopal consecration of active homosexuals or same-sex matrimony, then a dose of persecution could have a much-needed medicinal effect.

But all this is a matter of refocusing on how much Christian truth means to you. It has nothing to do with distinguishing between “basic” and “non-basic” truths. As soon as that terminology is used, we are dealing with a cultural and not a Christian distinction. A “basic” truth is one which most current Christian groups accept; a “non-basic” truth is one about which many Christians and Christian groups differ. “Basic” is always another term for “commonly accepted”, which is another term for “mere Christianity”, which inescapably changes with the times, and inevitably diminishes as confusion increases and commitment declines.

### **The Tapestry of Truth**

Truth is the conformity of the mind to reality. Expressed in words, truth is a whole series of propositions describing reality. But just as reality is all of a piece, and a misunderstanding of any aspect of it distorts our understanding of all of reality, so too are the truths of the Christian faith a tightly and richly woven tapestry which suffers in both strength and beauty if you pull out any thread or stitch any thread wrong.

Let’s look at a few examples. Some Christians do not believe the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed into heaven. Is this basic or trivial? Well, the wages of sin is the corruption of death. So if Mary had to suffer the corruption of death, we must assume that she was not free from sin, that she was not immaculately conceived. But if Mary were not immaculately conceived, then Christ’s sinlessness would be called into question, since ordinarily He would have been born in original sin. And if Christ were born in original sin, how could His human nature have been joined to His divine nature in the hypostatic union? Well, maybe Christ was not a God-man, but simply a great prophet elevated by God to a special height. One question leads inexorably to another. One error affects how we understand everything.

Or again, some Christians believe that homosexual activity is perfectly normal and moral. But what does this say about the very core of the Christian account of the creation and purpose of man? The creation story, reaffirmed elsewhere in Scripture and by Christ Himself, emphasizes from the first that God created man in his own image, “male and

female he created them” (Gn 1:27, 5:2). Thus a man “cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gn 1:24). This is part of a fundamental, two-sex design which most perfectly reflects God, and this design is further expressed in God’s most fundamental mandate and purpose for the human person: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gn 1:28). Thus affirming homosexuality is a very good way to undermine the Christian doctrine of the human person. Is this basic—or not?

Such examples can be multiplied many times over. Everything in Revelation and the natural law is connected to everything else. Truth is of a piece, whether it is revealed, philosophical, or scientific. Get any proposition wrong, and it has instant repercussions on all the others.

### **Everything is Basic**

I am not proposing that Christians should engage in religious warfare over creedal differences. Christians shouldn’t resort to force over the question of whether women may be ordained, but they shouldn’t resort to force either over whether Christ rose from the dead. My only point is that one of these issues is not really more “basic” than the other. On the question of the ordination of women hinges the validity of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, and on this validity depends our very ability to participate in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Besides, who is to say that the truth about the Resurrection—once the defining mark of “mere” Christianity—is any longer considered basic? There are now large numbers of Christians who view the Resurrection as symbolic, and as essentially irrelevant to their faith (if faith it can be called).

The larger point here is extremely important. You can debate how every Christian truth fits together in this or that scheme of opinion, but it is impossible to identify some proposed truths as basic in the sense that others are essentially irrelevant to the scheme. Indeed, if that’s the way your scheme works, then your scheme by definition does not represent reality. Therefore, persecution may help us to differentiate between what is really important (such as life, family, truth, faith, hope, and love) and what isn’t (such as private opinions, attachment to vice, personal financial goals, and the eager following of cultural trends). But not even persecution can make any Christian truth something other than basic.

Every truth impinges on every other truth. That this is not always obvious is purely a perceptual problem, in that we cannot mentally encompass all truths at once. But what seems less important from one vantage point immediately reveals itself as absolutely vital from another vantage point. Ultimately truth is one; only the propositions

expressing it are many. These propositions are all equally valuable. All of them find perfect, inseparable coherence in God.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=472>

# Style and Substance: A Confusion of Targets

May 28, 2007

It seems to me that many people confuse the substance of the Faith with the style in which the Faith is presented to others. I had an unfortunate exchange last week with someone who claimed that by drawing attention to Benedict XVI's emphasis on dialogue with Muslims, I was in effect collaborating with Benedict's departure from the true Faith and embracing a new religion. A less rational conclusion is hard to imagine.

## **Condemning Benedict XVI, John Paul II, and ...**

It goes without saying that the rapid secularization of Western culture since the middle of the last century has had a profound impact even on the Church. There is widespread confusion about the content of the Faith among laity and priests alike, there is a general lack of order, and there has been a great tendency even among bishops to attempt to retain positions of respect in an increasingly wayward culture by adopting a sort of doctrinal and disciplinary minimalism. All this is most unfortunate, and while it seems to be gradually getting better, there is little excuse for the extreme duration of the process.

During the same period, however, the chair of Peter has been occupied by unquestionably intelligent and courageous men who, despite their general unwillingness to discipline, have consistently and clearly articulated and explained the truths of the Catholic Faith with a breadth and power previously unequaled. Note that I say "articulated and explained". In some periods popes have been more prone simply to assert the Faith in the strongest possible terms, rather than to explain it and argue it, and some Catholics seem to think this made them greater teachers. For those who think this way, the carefully reasoned and persuasive rhetoric of Benedict XVI and John Paul II (as well as the fathers of Vatican II) is a sign of weakness—just one more symptom of a failure to hold their ground.

## **But They Haven't Thundered!**

I can understand that some people crave the simplicity and directness of bishops and popes who positively thunder. Give them Boniface VIII every time. It was important for

the Catholic world to be reminded in 1302 that subjection to the Roman Pontiff is necessary to the salvation of *every* person, the King of France not excepted. A few hundred years later, the anathemas of the Council of Trent provided to a still overwhelmingly Catholic Europe a clear summary of Protestant ideas to avoid. And it was remarkably clarifying in 1864 for the Catholic faithful to read the *Syllabus of Errors* of Pius IX, which condemned so many falsities of modern thought, or to read Pius X's condemnation of Modernism in 1907, *Lamentabili Sane*.

I have no quarrel with such documents; they serve a most useful purpose. They are particularly valuable when a pope can address large groups of faithful Catholics who may not quite know what to make of the debates, controversies and subtle ideological trends of their times. Such documents, like Pius IX's decision never to leave the Vatican, can be bracing for devout souls. But despite W. G. Ward's famous 19th century assertion that he liked nothing better than an encyclical with breakfast, mere proclamations of the Faith and condemnations of error from the citadel don't do much for Catholics who are culturally-conditioned to reject authority, and they do even less for those who aren't Catholic to begin with.

## Rules of Engagement

As a general rule, one can't persuade people of anything they don't already believe simply by making pronouncements. Instead, one must make a genuine effort to understand the others' point of view and to appreciate (rather than dismiss) their ideas and concerns. One must find some common ground as a starting point, as well as a common conceptual language, so one's arguments and explanations can be understood. Only then can one effectively engage another. And it is only after making that essential initial engagement that it becomes possible to patiently present the Christian vision and build the case for accepting its truth.

It seems to me that the documents of the Second Vatican Council do this pretty well, articulating a universal vision which leads ever more deeply into the heart of Catholicism. Pope John Paul II, as a personalist philosopher with a rock-solid classical background, was able to speak and write this way to a remarkable degree. The professorial Benedict XVI has the same gift; he is able to present the deepest concepts with disarming clarity in a language understandable by badly-trained Catholics and non-Catholics alike. It is not too much to say that the papal genius of the last generation has been to articulate the ancient Faith in a manner which shows how it perfects every natural insight, so that any serious enquirer can begin to glimpse the great riches of Catholicism.

## The Nature of Dialogue

Dialogue was a very dirty word in orthodox Catholic circles back in the 1960's and 1970's, and with good reason. It seemed that every hare-brained theologian, most women religious, too many priests, and a depressingly large number of lay "intelligentsia" were all too eager to advance the necessity of "dialogue" as a reason to redefine the Faith, and as the means to discover how it should be redefined. This, of course, is nonsense. It is a kind of intellectual vacuity, lacking any resemblance to what John Paul II and Benedict XVI have meant by dialogue, as both have emphasized in discussing ecumenical relations. If you have any doubts, read Pope John Paul II's *Ut Unum Sint (That They May All Be One)*.

When Benedict meets with Islamic leaders and continuously calls for dialogue with Muslims, this has nothing to do with altering the Catholic Faith, but everything to do with opening the Muslim mind, through a common core of reason and humanity, to the saving work of Christ. It is important to note that all peoples possess natural and even spiritual goods which are worthy of respect, and the fact that Catholicism is the font of all spiritual goods does not mean that the cherished traditions and values of others are worthy of contempt. The Church's thundering against Islam during periods of active warfare can easily be justified by the circumstances, but that approach never has brought Muslims to Christ. Recall that in the midst of all the thundering, St. Francis made his way to the Sultan's tent to talk about the Faith. The style (indeed, the triumphalism) of past official statements, which often served a far more militant strategy, was not necessarily the most effective style for getting the job done.

## Shooting the Messenger

The degree to which recent popes have been condemned in some quarters for what are essentially matters of style and strategy is nothing short of astonishing. Of course we all tend to be guilty of this in everyday life, often assuming that people are unorthodox because of the way in which they approach particular problems, how they conduct discussions, or which points they emphasize. At times these snap judgments prove justified, but often they don't. In any case, we can all perhaps understand the combination of shell-shock, zeal, and impatience which leads us to shoot first and ask questions later.

But we shouldn't shoot first, and that's the point. Those who condemn recent popes for abandoning the ancient Faith need to slow down and read the documents issued by these great men. They need to make a serious effort to understand the new and

wonderful depth of human insight and explanation which has been placed at the service of the truths of the Faith over the past fifty years.

If those who are discontented prefer greater discipline, fine, I'm on board. If they yearn for an occasional example to be made of a wayward bishop or pastor, I can only say I agree that clear, swift consequences send a salutary message. But I part company with those who condemn the entire direction of the pontificates of the last fifty years as a betrayal of the one true Faith. Such people suffer an overwhelming confusion of style and substance, and they are aiming at the wrong targets. They must stop their endless cycle of shooting and reloading. They must learn to see beyond the narrow confines of a rifle scope.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=189>

# AUTHORITY

# Authority and the Logic of Revelation

October 19, 2007

The rejection of religious authority by Catholics never ceases to amaze me. Whenever I remark on the need for some bishop to enforce a proper understanding of Catholicism, I hear from those who detect in my comments the foul odor of authoritarianism. Such persons perceive authority as driven always by petty egocentric concerns. This is very sad.

## Authority Is Everywhere

The human condition demands authority. We do not learn by instantly beholding the mind of God; we must struggle to decipher the nature of reality and to discern how to respond to it properly. For each person to figure out on his own how to fulfill even the most basic requirements of life is self-evidently impossible, and we resolve this fact of life by relying, always and continuously, on authority. This is no less true in how we approach the metaphysical secrets of the universe than in how we earn our daily bread.

Most of what we know and how we act is determined by the wisdom and example we have inherited from our culture, its institutions, or specific persons, by virtue of the superior experience, understanding and knowledge these can infuse into our lives. In the vast majority of cases, we neither dispute nor question this. We take it for granted because we regard these sources as authoritative. This is quite normal, for it is self-destructive to fear or refuse authority in the abstract. Without authority both human existence and human happiness are simply impossible.

For this reason, anyone who claims to reject authority in principle is necessarily really rejecting one or more specific authorities in favor of others. For example, the man who rejects religious authority in favor of “science” is clearly substituting one authority for another. He neither understands the limitations of science nor sees the authoritative cultural world view which causes all “men of science” to believe many things about which science has nothing to say. Similarly, the self-proclaimed free thinker has already, in every case, absorbed a worldview from the surrounding atmosphere which, unless he is mad, will be modified only very slightly by his own imagination, thoughts and desires.

For these reasons, the most sensible thing we can do with authority is to recognize

clearly which authorities we accept and which we reject, and why. This exercise requires a certain degree of detachment and true reflection—which is why you can always place more confidence in someone who understands and admits his authorities than in someone who believes he has left all authority behind. It is nothing but a variation of the old shell game to sweep away authority in favor of freedom or rationalism or progress or independent thought or even love itself. All that happens in this game is that we no longer know which shell covers the real authority that dominates our lives. Such a lack of self-knowledge does nobody any good.

### **The Authority of the Church**

The rejection of spiritual authority by Catholics is doubly sad because it betrays their failure to recognize the Church's altogether unique and powerful claims. As with any claim to authority, we are permitted to ask the scope of the claim, where it comes from, and why we should trust it. Thus, a scholar may claim authority in a particular branch of knowledge deriving from his intensive study of that material, and we should trust him if he has shown himself a sound scholar with no particular axe to grind. A government may claim authority in ordering the public life of the citizens of a particular region based on whatever claims to legitimacy it may possess, and we should honor that claim if the legitimacy is clear and the power to govern obvious. Yet both claims to authority are relatively shallow. There are no guarantees that the scholar or the government will always be right.

Now as for the Church, her claims are both very specific and very deep. She claims to have authority to properly interpret what God has revealed for man's life here on earth and his eternal destiny hereafter. In this connection, if a religion is truly revealed by God, then two principles become axiomatic. The first is that God must have clearly manifested Himself (or else we would be unable to recognize the revelation as divine); the second is that His revelation must depend on authority (or else we could have figured it out for ourselves). The Catholic faith claims to depend on the authority of God revealing, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived. The proper interpretation of the Catholic faith, in its precise doctrines and provisions, claims to depend on a specific authority established by God to protect and preserve the accuracy of His self-revelation over time.

In theory, of course, God could have arranged such things in a variety of ways. The claim of Catholicism is that God used certain agents of Revelation (law-givers, rulers, prophets, priests, writers and even an entire people) culminating in a promised Messiah; that He confirmed these sequential revelations by signs and wonders attributable only to

Himself and culminating in the Resurrection; that He established a Church to be His witness and agent to the end of time; and that He gave Peter and his successors the authority to confirm that Church in a proper understanding of all of Revelation, entrusting the papacy with the keys to heaven itself.

Now you can argue that God did not send agents of revelation; or that He did not confirm any revelation with compelling signs and wonders; or that He did not establish a Church; or that He did not give Peter and Peter's successors authority to properly interpret the content of the Faith. But you cannot believe any part of this structure of Divine Revelation without recognizing at least a very strong case for the other parts, and you cannot claim to believe the entire package while at the same time rejecting or ignoring the claim to authority it imposes—or pretending that the successful exercise of this authority doesn't really matter. Throughout the entire process of Revelation, God has said repeatedly that our very lives depend on it, and upon Him.

### **Excuses, Excuses**

But this is exactly what weak-minded Catholics claim when they repeatedly dismiss the efforts of the Pope, and the bishops in union with him, to exercise their authority to teach, rule and sanctify in a way which actually demands obedience. I can recall vividly when the early dissenters against *Humanae Vitae* asserted that the Church may have the keys to heaven but she does not have the keys to the bedroom, so we do not need to take her moral authority seriously. This led to the counter-magisterium of the (fashionable) theologians. Unfortunately, this attitude has spread so far that people in all walks of life now claim to love and cherish the Church while exempting themselves from any teachings they find inconvenient. And when I recently expressed the hope that Bishop Robert McManus would proceed to exercise his authority in the conflict over the Catholicity of Holy Cross College, I received email lamenting my celebration of authoritarianism. Such critics either do not know or do not care to admit the authorities to whom they bow.

Personally, I am tired of all of it: the ludicrous and often shabby excuses; the fear to discipline; the high-toned dismissal of authority as self-serving; and the general refusal to recognize the inexorable logic of Revelation. All that is necessary for the proper exercise of authority in the Catholic Church is for those in authority to be able to state clearly what standards you must meet to claim the name of a full disciple of Jesus Christ, and to make it clear that you forfeit the name "Catholic" if you do not meet the standards. Sinners are always welcome, but not those who deliberately redefine Revelation and then claim to be exempt from the authority Revelation has imposed. There is no bloodshed.

Nobody dies. But everybody soon learns that the word of legitimate spiritual authority, as an extension of God's word, means what it says and shall not return empty.

God has revealed Himself and His plan to us, and He did not spare the life of his only begotten Son to do so. This Revelation carries with it a principle of authority with a uniquely powerful claim. It is an authority of clarity, asking only that we call things by their right names and then choose sides. And indeed this idea of clarity completes the circle of my argument, for in the last analysis it shows again why authority is essential to human flourishing: Authority passes the time and energy test wonderfully well. It makes things simple. You know where you stand, and where you are going.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=218>

# The Nature of Infallibility

March 05, 2010

I've alluded frequently enough to the four basic arguments that establish the teaching authority of the popes (for a brief summary see my 2005 blog entry on [The Primacy of Peter](#)). But the topic of papal infallibility concerns me again just now in a somewhat more precise way, especially in light of last week's *In Depth Analysis* ([Escape from Theological Minimalism](#)). The precise issue is this: Granted that the pope can teach infallibly, how do we know when he is doing so?

## Infallibility and "Definitions"

This a fair question, and it has received quite a few confusing answers. The confusion tends to come from those who (as I mentioned in my piece on theological minimalism) want to limit what we have to believe to truths that are labeled "definitions". Thus some have argued that the pope is not infallible unless he explicitly claims to be making a "definition" of faith, in effect defining a dogma. Or to put it in the terms used at Vatican I, it is argued that only such explicit "definitions" qualify as *ex cathedra* statements whose infallibility is guaranteed.

On this (inadequate) understanding, only two relatively recent Magisterial acts are considered to be infallible, the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX in 1854 and of the Assumption by Pius XII in 1950, both of which were solemnly defined as dogmas. The infallibility of other magisterial teachings has been questioned, for example the teaching against contraception by Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, or even the strong statement by John Paul II on the Church's inability to ordain women. Let's take a quick look at the objections to these two statements, as representatives of a type.

When Paul VI taught the immorality of contraception, he first set forth the natural and Christian vision of marriage and procreation. He then concluded as follows:

Therefore We base Our words on the first principles of a human and Christian doctrine of marriage when We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. Equally to be condemned, as the

magisterium of the Church has affirmed on many occasions, is direct sterilization, whether of the man or of the woman, whether permanent or temporary.

Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means. ([Humanae Vitae](#), #14)

Those who wished to deny the certain truth of this teaching immediately argued that the pope had failed to state that he was “defining” anything, and therefore this statement must be taken as only a very weighty opinion from which, for good reason, theologians may legitimately dissent.

When John Paul II taught that the Church is not authorized to ordain women, he used the following far stronger language:

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful. ([Apostolic Letter on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone](#), #4)

Despite the forcefulness of this statement, some who did not like it actually argued that the pope failed the infallibility test because he hadn’t said he was teaching definitively (he had said instead that his judgment was to be “definitively held”)! Others argued that the Church’s lack of authority is not a positive teaching of faith, and so the statement did not qualify as infallible.

### **The Nature of Infallibility**

In such baseless arguments we begin to see how absurd it is to attempt to tie infallibility to particular verbal formulas. Infallibility depends not on a magic formula but on the very nature of the Church herself as a perfect society salvifically bound to Christ until the end of time. Because the Church is an indefectible society ordered to salvation, she must not only have the light of Christ’s teaching but she must have this light in such a way that she cannot, as a body, fall into error in the matters of salvation for which she was constituted (namely, matters of faith and morals). Indeed, as John Henry Cardinal Newman so wisely observed, if the first generation of Christians had a living and infallible guide, it would create a marked difference in dispensation if subsequent

generations lacked such a guide. In fact, it would be a signal that the Church had already been effectively destroyed.

Thus we logically expect that the Church must possess an infallible teaching authority (or Magisterium), and this is exactly what we find in Scripture, Tradition and the Church's mode of operation from the earliest times. Peter was given the keys to heaven and the power to bind and loose. Christ prayed that Peter would not defect in faith so that he in turn could confirm the faith of his brethren. The earliest Christian community understood that this authority must be passed on to Peter's successors for the Church to remain what it was, and it acknowledged Peter's successors in the bishops of Rome. From the first Christians looked to the popes for decisions about the Faith. Heretics and orthodox alike sought vindication in Rome, and this authority was scarcely challenged for several hundred years until a portion of the Church came under pressure from the Byzantine Emperor.

As a matter of fundamental ecclesiology, then, we find two significant truths. First, all the members of the Church are bound to obey Peter and his successors when they purport to settle questions of faith and morals. Second, all the members of the Church cannot be bound to error without the Church being destroyed, the gates of Hell prevailing against her, and Christ's promise to be with her until the end of time made void. Therefore, from both the promises of Christ Himself and the very necessity imposed by the nature of the Church, the Holy Spirit must preserve the popes from error when they exercise their supreme authority to teach about faith and morals to the whole Church.

### **Papal Intention**

Note again that this protection does not depend on any sort of verbal formula; it is not invoked by the casting of some spell. Rather, it depends simply and solely on the intention of the Pope to teach on a matter of faith and morals. While not all such teachings are "de fide" (that is, not all state something specifically revealed in the deposit of faith), all are nonetheless true, for all are drawn either directly or as corollaries from Revelation or the natural law, the two sources from which we learn how to attain union with God. When the pope speaks about matters of faith and morals, then, the question is not whether he uses a specific formula but whether it is sufficiently clear that he intends (1) by virtue of his supreme authority (2) to explain a doctrine (3) on a matter of faith or morals (4) to be held by the whole Church. Obviously the language he uses must give us the necessary clues, and it is true that the more formal and precise the pope is in stating his intention, the easier it is to tell whether he is teaching infallibly. But if the intention is

clear, then the whole Church must obey, and the teaching must by the nature of things be infallible. There is no other option.

This, then, is the explanation behind Vatican II's expression of the authority of what is called the ordinary magisterium of the Church. Having stated that the faithful must adhere "with a religious assent" to what the bishops teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff (such as what they teach in the documents promulgated by an ecumenical council), the Council goes on to say:

This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking. (#25)

What this means is that we must look to the intention expressed in the document in question to determine what the Pope's mind and will are. Clearly, we can only know this "either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking." And if we discern that his mind and will are to teach to the whole Church by virtue of his Petrine authority on a matter of faith and morals, then we must accept his teaching act as infallible—and the resulting statements as certainly true.

### **When Wouldn't He Be Infallible?**

Now the pope's intention might be certain or uncertain and, if certain, it might actually be certain that he did *not* intend to teach infallibly. Thus, for example, when Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI both wrote and published books during their pontificates, in which they touched on many points of theology and spirituality, it was obvious from the first that they did not intend this as an exercise of their papal magisterium. Indeed, in the introduction to his own book, Benedict expressly states that anyone is free to disagree with him. In these cases, the popes did not intend to teach, just as they would not intend to teach in an off-hand remark, a telephone conversation, or a private letter. In still other cases, a pope might clearly intend to offer spiritual advice or pastoral counsel, rather than to formally teach on a matter of faith and morals, or he might impose some discipline on the whole Church, requiring obedience but not involving faith, such as a

particular fast. Again, if a pope were to say even to the whole Church that we should work as if everything depends on us and pray as if everything depends on God, only a fool would argue that he had thereby given an infallible explanation of the precise nature of our dependence on Divine Providence.

Quite apart from the pope's intention, there are large areas in which Christ has not promised to protect the pope's utterances, and equally large areas in which the Holy Spirit is not bound by the nature of the Church to protect the pope from error. If the pope chooses to comment to the whole Church about some situation in the world which is not a matter of faith and morals (such as opining, as John Paul II did, that modern penal systems make the death penalty mostly unnecessary), he has no special protection. He may be right or wrong, and the faithful may agree or disagree. If he teaches theology to a particular class, or makes a spiritual point to a group of pilgrims, or argues a point of doctrine in a private letter to his best friend, the Holy Spirit can see there is no risk of binding the whole Church. In other words, whenever the pope is speaking in his private capacity as a man, or is not addressing the entire Church, or is discussing something other than faith and morals, he is not infallible.

There could also be situations in which the Pope's intention is uncertain. Either the audience he has in mind might or his desire to teach may be unclear. For example, if in an encyclical a pope were to write that "Mary receives her splendor as the stars receive light from the sun", it would be at best uncertain that the pope intends to teach what the mistaken scientific reference implies. He has simply used a simile in the service of some larger point, and the simile has (in the light of a more perfect astronomical understanding) fallen flat. Or if the pope writes favorably of the theological achievements of a particular saint in an encyclical commemorating that saint's birth, we may doubt that he intends to formally teach the saint's particular views to the whole Church.

However, if one or more popes were to repeat the same idea about faith or morals in various ways and various documents over a period of time, one would at length come to understand that there really is a truth at stake which is being formally taught and which requires assent. Hence, again, the pope's intent may be known "either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking."

### **Vatican I's Decree on Infallibility**

With all this in mind, and remembering that my first motivation was to refute those who artificially restrict infallibility to "definitions" and "dogma", let us examine the language

used at Vatican I in its justly famous decree on papal infallibility in Chapter 4 of the *First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ*:

And so We, adhering faithfully to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, to the glory of God, our Savior, the elevation of the Catholic religion and the salvation of Christian peoples, with the approbation of the sacred Council, teach and explain that the dogma has been divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when carrying out the duty of the pastor and teacher of all Christians in accord with his supreme apostolic authority he explains a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, through the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, operates with that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer wished that His church be instructed in defining doctrine on faith and morals; and so such definitions of the Roman Pontiff from himself, but not from the consensus of the Church, are unalterable.

Here at last we can see where the words “defining” and “definitions” come in. They come not as terms needed to identify infallible teaching, but as the obvious consequence of having uttered an infallible teaching. The pope is infallible when (1) by virtue of his supreme authority (2) he explains a doctrine (3) of faith or morals (4) to be held by the universal Church. It is precisely this teaching, however expressed, that constitutes the “definitions” the passage later mentions. The pope does not have to state that he is “defining” something or that his teaching is a “definition”. Rather, when he teaches by his supreme authority on a matter of faith or morals to the whole church, the matter is thus defined, and may be referred to henceforth as a definition.

When the pope uses his authority as pope to promulgate a document explaining a matter of faith and morals to the whole Church—as is the case with many encyclicals and apostolic letters, for example—his intention is generally quite clear. Any given document may be long and may touch on many matters by way of introduction, background or implication. But if he is deliberately addressing a particular issue of faith or morals, especially a controverted issue, in order to make Catholic teaching clear, at certain key points the document in question will make more categorical statements to “explain a doctrine”. Wherever this intention is clear, regardless of the specific form of language used, the faithful are bound to adhere to the teaching in question. The pope’s act of teaching is then infallible, and so what he has taught is certainly true.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=432>

# Today's False Teachers

January 05, 2010

It's time to look again at the many false "Catholic" teachers among us, who have arisen to lead the faithful astray much as did false prophets in the time before Christ. Wayward bishops, priests, religious and theologians have promoted countless destructive heresies, some of which even deny Who Christ is. This can lead only to spiritual disaster, of course, but too many follow in the wake of their licentious teaching, holding the truth in contempt. The reality is that such teachers exploit the faithful with lies. They have already been condemned; destruction is at work within them.

Consider: If God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them into a pit of gloom to await the judgment; if God did not spare the ancients, but preserved Noah as a herald of righteousness, along with seven others, when He brought the flood upon the ungodly; if by turning Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes God condemned and made of their inhabitants an example to those who would be unfaithful; if God rescued Lot, who was distressed by the wickedness around him—the lawless deeds which vexed his holy soul day after day—then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, especially those who indulge their passions in lust and so come to despise authority.

Such bold and willful teachers are not afraid to revile even the angels, though despite their greater might and power, the angels refrain from pronouncing judgment against them in the presence of the Lord. Nonetheless, these false teachers, born to be caught and killed like irrational animals following nothing but instinct, and rejecting that holiness of which they are so ignorant, will be destroyed through their own wrongdoing. They may count it pleasure to revel in the daytime, but they are only blots and blemishes reveling in dissipation, seeking always to seduce the faithful. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice wavering souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Their end is certain! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray; they have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgressions; it took a dumb ass speaking with a human voice to restrain that prophet's madness!

Such teachers are waterless springs, and mists driven by a storm; for them, the deepest darkness has been reserved. Uttering loud and foolish boasts, they entice with

the passions of the flesh Christians who have barely escaped from those who live in error. They promise freedom, but they are really slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved.

If any who have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ become once again entangled in those defilements and overpowered, then their last state is worse than the first. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy instruction they have received. Thus do all of our false “Catholic” teachers prove the ancient proverb: The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire.

*[Inspired writing? Yes, but not mine. Really inspired, it is in fact, very nearly verbatim, the second chapter of St. Peter’s second epistle. St. Peter might just as easily have written it yesterday as in the middle of the first century. It still rings true, doesn’t it?]*

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=566>

# MODERNISM

# Escape from Theological Minimalism

February 26, 2010

In the United States and elsewhere in the Western world, we have been immensely weakened in our understanding of both the Church and our role in the Church by the problem of theological minimalism. Originally thought to be the stock-in-trade of Modernists, this intellectual disease is now affecting most of us. The result is a loss of ecclesial communion, a weakening of apostolic mission, and a growing unconsciousness of the links between the Church here on earth and the Church in her heavenly reality. Much of this arises from the loss of “corporate thinking” in Western civilization, but it has been greatly exacerbated by the failure of large portions of the Western episcopacy in the twentieth century, and by all the succeeding chaos.

## Thinking Corporately

By “loss of corporate thinking” I am not at all referring to big business. In a business, the term “corporation” is merely an indication that a business structure has been embodied by law as an entity distinct from its officers and agents. Thus the President of Entrepreneurial Experiment, Inc. does not lose his personal wealth if the entrepreneurial experiment doesn’t work. Some would argue that we have way too much of that sort of corporate thinking today.

But if we cast our minds back to the distant past, before the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th century, we find that people actually identified themselves first and foremost as members of groups, of bodies that both gave expression to and protected their own personal identities. Thus persons in the Medieval and Early Modern periods, for example, conceived of themselves not as atomic or alienated individuals who were wholly on their own, but as constitutive members of a family, a social class, a guild or, above all, the Church. They thought corporately.

When people think this way they are far more conscious of the ties that bind. In those days, one’s religious identity was inextricably bound to the identity of the Church, just as one’s personal identity was inextricably bound to the identity of the family. Nowadays, we tend to think of our religious identity over against the Church, and our personal identity over against the family. Both must be fractured if our own self-actualization demands it, as we see in the astronomically high rate of divorce and custom-built

“families”, as well as in the ease with which people move from parish to parish and even from Church to church—to take just two telling examples of the problem.

When people “thought corporately” as members of the Catholic Church, they had a sense that the Church mediated their experience of the Divine through a hierarchy and community bound to an eschatological reality, not only in the present day but forward and backward in time. To be a member of the Church was to realize the reality of the body of Christ—militant, suffering and triumphant—engaged in continuous and glorious worship of the Father while carrying out the Father’s will. There was a time, and not very long ago, when our sense of rootedness in the Church was such that Catholics didn’t even feel right about changing parishes for any but the gravest of motives. When we “think individually”, however, we constantly measure our experience of “church” against our own personal needs. If we are discomfited in any way, we go elsewhere and do something else. The only difference all this makes, we too often think, is the difference it makes *to me*.

### **The Failure of the Episcopacy**

In the West we were all incredibly ripe for the cultural turmoil that took center stage beginning with the 1960’s. Even earlier, a process of ecclesial disintegration had begun among Catholic intellectuals and academicians. From the rise of Modernism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Catholic intellectuals increasingly focused on the new religious reality they could create, not on their rootedness in the life of an eschatological community which preceded, followed and, indeed, was all around them, on earth, in purgatory, in heaven.

Out of the ranks of scholars, or at least under their influence, are bishops born. Whatever the deficiencies of early 20th-century bishops who focused on buildings and political clout, the semi-Modernist bishops who began taking office around mid-century were much more interested in chasing the culture in ideological ways. Bishop after bishop lost sight of the corporate dimension of the Church, both in terms of visible communion on earth and invisible communion with the heavenly host. Instead, they pursued individual plans and programs designed to make the Church more a part of the larger social order—the worldly society which the Church is in fact called to serve precisely by virtue of her distinctiveness as a community of grace.

The widespread failure of the Catholic intelligentsia and the Catholic episcopacy to cope adequately with a rapidly secularizing culture led to a massive breakdown in faith and authentic Catholic action—a breakdown in self-understanding, really—on the part of many priests, religious and laity. This breakdown confirmed and strengthened the

growing Western tendency for people to think primarily in terms of their own personal convenience and desires. A huge number—perhaps even a majority—of Catholic leaders were busy demonstrating how easy it was to drop or transform whatever in Catholicism conflicted with prevailing secular attitudes, even while claiming to offer a more relevant Christianity to the surrounding world: In other words, a Christianity *more like* the surrounding world.

At the same time, quite a few lay persons, who had just had their importance to the Church emphasized as never before by the Second Vatican Council, found themselves forced into a rapid deepening of their sense of apostolic mission by the very vacuum created by failing bishops, priests and religious. Laymen emerged nearly everywhere as defenders and teachers of the Faith. This was a great thing, but it too came at a cost, because this new lay commitment had to be exercised so often *in opposition* to the local priest or even the local bishop. And so the same habit of mind that had already done so much damage elsewhere was reinforced here, the habit of individually judging Catholic principles over against the competent ecclesiastical authority, and of explaining away in consequence many aspects of authority one might have otherwise obeyed.

This could be amply justified in cases in which priests and bishops exercised their authority illegitimately, by ignoring either the disciplinary directives of the Holy See or the Magisterium itself. But under these circumstances it became very difficult to think of oneself as part of the corporation of the local Church bonded to the diocesan Church bonded to the universal Church. Too often, a bad habit was formed. Everything spiritual became a case of “me against the world”.

### **Theological Minimalism**

The result of all this is a truncated form of Catholicism, characterized by theological minimalism, even among the most traditional of Catholics. The Modernists began it with their arguments in favor of fusing Catholicism with the prevailing attitudes of the Western world. By now Modernists are pretty far away from anything but a frank contempt for Catholic doctrine, but for a long time the Modernist method was to insist that only the great dogmas were essential objects of Faith. Thus Modernists often concentrated on reinterpreting these as necessary, but they did not deny their importance. But everything that wasn't a great dogma was simply dismissed on the grounds that it did not require the assent of Faith.

Thus the characteristic stance of Modernism is that one is a good Catholic if one minimally adheres to a few very basic points. Within that rather nebulous and sketchy framework, one is free to unroll the form of Catholicism one prefers. For Modernists this

typically creates a religion more or less based on “what everybody knows”—a religion congenial to our cultural elites. This same stance was adopted by a great many bishops who, having become freelancers in their individual churches, figured they had to pay attention to only a few minimal points of Catholic unity while largely running their local churches as they saw fit.

Increasingly the rank and file learned that there were only a few immutable points about Catholicism (none of them, apparently, moral), and that anyone could claim the name of “good Catholic” as long as he described himself as caring about the faith, believed that Christ loves all of us, and affirmed that the Church is “very important in my life.” Based on theological minimalism, who could judge among the competing forms of Catholicism? The case against contraception? Not a dogma! Opposition to abortion? Mere politics! Soon, in fact, it became widely apparent that only those who did presume to make such judgments could safely be described as bad Catholics.

Such minimalism has also afflicted those who, rejecting ecclesiastical chaos and infidelity, have erroneously concluded that this crisis was caused jointly by the work of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent popes who have defended it. Desperate to preserve their own peace of mind as believing Catholics, such persons have been psychologically compelled to argue—like the Modernists they hate—that, fortunately, only a very few dogmas and definitions require our assent and obedience. The idea here is that everything thought to have contributed to the ecclesiastical collapse can be proved to be non-authoritative, and so it can be safely ignored. Way too much of what it means to be Catholic is reduced to the question of infallibility. On this basis, the whole thrust of an ecumenical council can be dismissed as a “bad option”, and it becomes possible to embrace and affirm a contrary Program of Our Own.

Even those who recognize and deplore this theological minimalism are not always much farther ahead. They may yearn for a renewed corporate sense of the Church—the visible but messy flesh and blood Church on earth joined to the invisible triumphant Church in heaven—but they are hard-pressed to develop the new and more fully Catholic habits that alone can bring it about. Indeed the road back is exceedingly difficult. But it must begin with a rejection of this Catholic reductionism that I am calling theological minimalism.

### **Priest, Prophet and King**

As a matter of very fundamental fact, the Catholic Church is rooted in the three-fold mission and authority of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet and king. By virtue of baptism, every Christian participates in this mission and authority. Bishops, in communion with

the Bishop of Rome, possess its fullness. They are vicars of Christ in their own dioceses so long as they exercise their authority according to the will and dispositions of the Roman Pontiff, and in union with him. They share this mission and authority, partially but significantly, with their priests, who find their own mission and authority fulfilled in collaboration with their bishop. The laity too exercise priestly, prophetic and kingly roles under the guidance and direction of their pastors, formed and nourished by the sacramental, teaching and disciplinary functions of the hierarchical Church.

It is important to note that the concepts of “dogma”, “definition” and “infallibility” apply only to one part of what it means to be Catholic. They apply to the prophetic office, the teaching office, of the Church. Catholicism is never less than her certain doctrines, but it is always much more. To use one apt analogy, doctrine simply forms a skeleton for a sturdy body. Theological minimalism makes of the Catholic life something skeletal (often with an incomplete skeleton!), as if nothing but the certain propositions of our Faith govern our lives as Catholics. Every form of theological minimalism is a sin first and foremost against the prophetic office, which encompasses every expression of the truth. But it is also a sin against both the priestly and kingly offices, for theological minimalism by its very nature tends to exclude them both.

Now let us consider the priestly office, which finds its perfection in the sacrifice of Christ in obedience to the Father, a sacrifice in which we are all privileged to join. This priestly office is exercised preeminently in the Mass, which joins us to the universal Church in both earth and heaven in an unbroken chorus of sacrificial praise to God. In addition, all the Church’s sacraments, deriving their power from this sacrifice, are part and parcel of the priestly office, as is every denial of self by which, through the power of the Holy Spirit, all of us may be sanctified. Through the priestly office we are brought to interior union with God, experiencing the flow of grace and consequent growth in holiness. All failures to properly implement or properly accept and participate in the Divine liturgy are sins against the priestly office, as is breaking with the Church in our worship, or the failure to accept the Church’s counsels of holiness, or the refusal to accept spiritual direction.

And finally there is the kingly office, the office of governance. This is the office most often today honored only in the breach. The pope and the bishops, by virtue of the fullness of the kingly office they possess, are charged with the governance of the Church of God, and have the authority necessary to command everyone in the Church in this regard. All those, whether Modernists or Traditionalists or simply Individualists, who actually define themselves through a certain resistance to the legitimate governing authority of their ecclesiastical superiors, sin against the kingly office of the Church.

While terms such as “definition” and “dogma” and “infallible” are not properly used in describing the kingly authority and mission, there is another highly relevant word that must always be brought to bear: *Obedience*. All of us are to some degree affected by our habitual failure to obey. The blight is not a characteristic of just one group; it is universal.

The way out will be difficult for all of us, for either we have voluntarily adopted a bad habit or we have been pressed and harried into adopting it. And indeed this bad habit—this intense quest for self-satisfaction which justifies itself in the Catholic context as theological minimalism—is in our time one of the major defining elements of Western culture; and so we absorb it continuously almost without realizing it. It will take work both long and hard to overcome this habit, work that includes a difficult but sincere effort to rebuild mutual trust among the different grades and orders of the Church. But the road to authentic renewal runs straight out of theological minimalism into a deeper understanding of what it really means to be fully and richly Catholic. That meaning will be effectively appropriated only through a deeper commitment to the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices of the Church.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=431>

# Theology by Happenstance

May 13, 2010

I'm sitting here staring at a new book, *The American Catholic Revolution: How the Sixties Changed the Church Forever* by Mark S. Massa, SJ. It is an "uncorrected advance reading copy", as the book has not yet been released, and this is at least a temporary mercy. The author apparently fancies himself the Alexander Pope of the twenty-first century. His thesis is "Whatever is, is right." Of course, for the great neo-classical poet this was an affirmation of the fundamental order of the universe as created by God; for Fr. Massa it is an affirmation of the necessary rightness of each successive human worldview, as created by an ever-shifting historical consciousness.

I'm not concerned about this particular book, which is utterly devoid of originality, but I remain concerned about its old ideas. Fr. Massa argues that the widespread change among Catholics in sexual morality, doctrine, liturgy, and attitudes toward ecclesiastical authority over the past fifty years is rooted in the incontrovertible reality that different worldviews make sense to people in different historical periods. Not only should the Church change her message to reflect these shifting world views—this shifting historical consciousness—but in fact she must do so to survive, for history is ultimately written not from above but from below. The Church has "changed forever" and will continue to do so. Historical consciousness and reality are identical.

Here is Massa's complete account of recent Catholic history: (1) Pope St. Pius X's condemnation of Modernism was an effort to freeze the Church in a moment of time already slipping away; (2) The resulting fear of scholars for the next fifty years caused pressure for change to build, bottled up as it was through a denial of history, until Vatican II triggered an explosion in the 1960's; (3) This explosion was an inevitable cataclysmic shift which created a new Church, a Church which could both represent and communicate with people of a new era, a new consciousness, a new Faith.

## Conclusions First

Though Fr. Massa offers universal conclusions, his examples are drawn from the history of the Church in the United States. Those long involved in the battles over Church renewal will recognize the pattern. The book focuses on liturgical changes (orchestrated largely by Fr. Frederick McManus), the widespread rejection of the Church's teaching

against contraception in *Humanae Vitae* and the succeeding battle with Fr. Charles Curran of Catholic University, the controversy over the direction of the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters in Los Angeles, the Berrigan brothers and the Catonsville Nine, and Avery Dulles' models of the Church. But it really doesn't matter what examples Fr. Massa cites; these are merely famous cases to illustrate a general trend, and it is something else entirely to proclaim the trend good. Here everything is used to justify a belief which Fr. Massa has actually adopted *a priori*—not only that changing historical consciousness is inevitable but that whatever attitudes, beliefs and behaviors emerge from it must therefore be right.

Any schoolboy could spot the fallacy in a heartbeat, but Fr. Massa apparently feels duty-bound to offer three lessons: First, "it seems highly unlikely that historical consciousness—the awareness that everything, including the Church, changes as history unfolds—can ever be effectively explained away again" (158). Second, "the widespread acceptance of the seemingly self-evident truth that things change will make it increasingly difficult to propound or defend Church teaching and practice by appealing to timeless, static categories of propositional truth" (159). Third, the categories of "liberal" and "conservative" that have plagued the post-conciliar Church are not helpful because they interfere with getting on with the job of accepting the validity of the historical-consciousness paradigm, which is this: From the first, "disruption, discontinuity, and evolution [were] part of the very fiber of the Catholic tradition. Change was not foreign to Catholic tradition; it defined it" (162).

I have offered the author's conclusions first because it is clear that they constitute a belief-system independent of analysis. For an author so in awe of changing historical consciousness, the reader is surprised to find that nothing at all has changed in Fr. Massa's mind since about 1965. All Fr. Massa has done is to give a contemporary voice to the theory of Modernism, which holds that doctrines of faith and morals ultimately flow not from Revelation but from the religious consciousness of each epoch. In the Modernist view, there is no reason to suppose that Catholics of one era will come up with the same answers to life's pressing questions as those in another era. We may, if we like, give a nod to Modernism for understanding what it takes no special wit to understand—that what happens happens. But it takes a huge leap of faith to assert that what happens is always lock, stock and barrel what God wants.

The more significant questions are whether something should have happened, whether it happened without moral fault, whether it pleased God that it happened, whether what happened is salutary, whether it calls for celebration or conversion, and whether, in the last analysis, we are to form our judgments based on how a new culture

interprets God's will, or rather on a direct Revelation from God which somehow transcends culture. It is the answer to these questions that ought to determine our response to change. Unfortunately, Modernism's revelation is historical consciousness. It may aptly be described as theology by happenstance. It is the very antithesis of Christianity, for Christianity provides man with the ability he craves to transcend the limitations of his historical environment.

### **The Grain of Truth**

Modernists lament certain features of the Church in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and this lament has just enough truth in it to make Modernist theory appear plausible to the uninitiated. The problem is that the Church was often intellectually reactionary during this period. One can well understand why, for she had been battered unceasingly by an increasingly secular European ethos for the past hundred years or so, and her leaders were habituated to their own splendid system of thought, a system based largely on the Thomist synthesis which had been so effectively expounded in official Catholic circles since the counter-reformation. There was still a very strong sense that Europe was fundamentally Christian and that lost ground could be recovered by pushing back. The Church therefore had a marked tendency to defend those who defended her and condemn those who attacked her. She allied herself too often with what we may term the "old order", and was too little open to what could be said in favor of new approaches. This was true politically, socially and theologically.

Just as ecclesiastical authority had a marked tendency to favor the aristocracy over the working classes, so too it had a marked tendency to condemn theological work which moved outside the scholastic box. Pope Leo XIII began to shift the social outlook of the Church decisively in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, but it took longer for the Holy Office to take a more even-handed approach to the more creative thinkers of the Catholic world, those who tried to emphasize neglected areas of study or deploy modern insights to explore Revelation in new ways. Just as Newman had been distrusted in Rome for some time in the 19th century, though he was ultimately vindicated before he died, so too did remarkable theologians such as Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac occasion suspicion in Rome because of their interest in revivifying Catholic thought by returning to the sources, instead of always arguing within the highly formalistic scholastic framework. There was a lot of Modernism going around in the late 19th and early 20th century, and it was justly and repeatedly condemned. But not everybody who thought outside the box was a Modernist.

It is also true that the suppression of Modernism was often more formal than

substantive. The issues raised by Modernists—such as the role of historical consciousness in shaping the expression of religious beliefs in different periods—were not effectively engaged, and many a scholar chose to keep a low profile in Catholic universities and seminaries around the world while becoming increasingly enamored of secular ideas. When the Church herself called for an authentic Catholic renewal at the Second Vatican Council, including a return to the sources, the seed sown by the Holy Spirit too often landed in intellectual environments that had already secretly rejected substantial portions of Catholic teaching, or had at least adopted principles that would cause what we might now call a “renewal stampede”: overwhelming, irresistible, fast, and straight toward the cliff.

Of course Fr. Massa has his own answer for all this, “the law of unintended consequences” (159). It is useless now, he says, to reexamine the documents of Vatican II through a hermeneutic of continuity (Benedict XVI’s term) because once any renewal is launched, it develops a life of its own which must be taken as normative. Why? Because that’s what it means to be historically conscious. We could point out how provincial this view has become, since it has produced the results Fr. Massa so ardently desires only in the West. Africa has obviously not yet loomed on his Old World horizon. For the moment, at least, in the insular Modernist world, Alexander Pope’s great one-liner continues to serve.

### **The Great Fallacy**

We can grant, I think, that among some perfectly legitimate Catholic scholars, the myopia of Church leaders has sometimes rankled. I doubt any committed Catholic nowadays would have trouble understanding that this might be so. But Modernism has always gone beyond the legitimate grievances of faithful scholars to do exactly what Church authority said it would do all along: throw the baby out with the bathwater. In one section of *The American Catholic Revolution*, Fr. Massa offers two observations which, taken together, capture the essential fallacy of Modernism.

First:

Whatever the strengths of that older classicist worldview...it can no longer provide plausible explanations for Church teaching. Such a function is crucial for teaching doctrine and ethical practice, as the Catholic theological tradition has always argued that Church leaders have the obligation to explain *why* they offer specific teaching in terms that are both accessible and convincing to the faithful. (160)

And second:

Moral theologians such as Charles Curran who attempted to show how and why Catholic theology “was put in an impossible situation when the best modern thought was perceived as a challenge to established doctrinal positions” were dealt with as disloyal, or even heterodox.

What this means, especially in the overall context of the book, is not that the Church ought always to try to explain her teachings in as convincing a manner as possible, but that if she cannot explain them in a manner convincing to the Faithful, she has failed in an essential obligation. Further, this failure invalidates her doctrine, and removes any corresponding obligation on the part of the Faithful to follow it. For as Fr. Mark Massa knows full well, Charles Curran did not get in trouble for arguing that the Church ought to work hard to come up with better arguments against contraception. He got into trouble because he refused to agree with the Magisterial judgment that, on God’s own authority, contraception is immoral. In this the Church imitates Our Lord, for Jesus Christ did not insist that we understand everything the Father has revealed. In fact, He never seemed overly concerned that scholars often struggled intellectually with what He had to say. But He did expect them to recognize the signs of His authority, and so to receive everything He taught as a liberating truth.

Ultimately for the Modernist there is nothing transcendent about Christianity, nothing timeless, nothing true always and everywhere, nothing eternal, nothing you can take to the bank in the economy of salvation. The sole criterion for orthodoxy is always orthopraxis. What is true is simply how people live. Revelation cannot serve as a guide to human history from the transcendent Author of history. No, Revelation is only whatever we discern as good in our own time and place. Once again let me state the obvious. Modernism is theology by happenstance. And this makes it the ultimate theology of convenience for the decadent West. If you wish to identify with the cultural mainstream, there is no better tactic than to make the cultural mainstream your source of Revelation.

## **The Changing Church**

To take for a moment the case of contraception (which, as one could so easily predict, lies at the center of Fr. Massa’s thesis), it is certainly true that the arguments initially offered for the Church’s position were not as persuasive as the Church would have liked. It is also true that initial arguments were rooted strongly in the natural law tradition, and

that this tradition is increasingly difficult for people in our age to grasp, probably because our society is highly technological and takes the manipulation of nature as the norm. But what the Modernists never tell you is that faithful scholars immediately began exploring the problem more deeply, which is exactly what theologians are supposed to do, because the very essence of theology is faith seeking understanding. Very soon, throughout the very next decade, arguments were developed which were both more convincing and more persuasive.

Understanding the difference between “convince” and “persuade” might also be useful. To convince means, literally, to “conquer strongly”. When we convince someone of something, we offer arguments which overcome intellectual resistance and force the intellect to assent to their truth. But to persuade means to “make sweet to” someone. Here we attempt to explain other attractions of an idea, associating it with the hearer’s own ideas of fittingness, nobility, emotional satisfaction, social well-being, or other desirable attributes. The theologian is primarily concerned with convincing. But the best arguments in the world can be met with a stony heart by those who do not wish to be persuaded of an inconvenient truth. The failure to convince another of a truth does not make the truth false. It remains for God to read the heart, in order to see where the problem really lies.

In any case, the effort to make the Church’s entire teaching on human sexuality less abstract and more personal—more psychological, so to speak, without becoming any less logical—has led to a surprising number of developments, culminating in Pope John Paul II’s remarkable theology of the body, which is undoubtedly expressed through a language and a frame of reference more easily accessible to our contemporaries. Some would suggest these developments exploit the genius of Augustine, which may be more effectively deployed today than the genius of Aquinas. So often there is more than one way to make a point. But the more important issue for this discussion is that this intellectual effort was made by those who believed the Church’s teaching to be true and the conclusions reached by examining the “historical consciousness” of modern man to be false.

This decision of Faith led some to more effectively deploy what is changeable in the Church to transform the world in favor of what is eternal in the Church. So in some respects, of course, the Church does change. Neither Pope St. Pius X nor any other intelligent Catholic ever thought otherwise. To say so is to erect a straw man, the easier to knock it down. Such a straw man signifies only that the Church has not changed in the way a given speaker prefers. But the Church’s mission is constantly to adapt her human elements to new situations in order to more effectively inculcate her Divine elements.

The Church does not deny change; she just happens to recognize that the purpose of change is to enable us to see more clearly different sides of what never changes. She takes each new situation as another opportunity to draw all men closer to a God whose very Being is unchanging Love. She is certainly historically conscious, but she is also eternally conscious. This makes her a veritable powerhouse of change. Indeed, the Church's argument is not that human cultures should not change at all but that, without the Church, they simply cannot change enough.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=441>

# The One and Only Theological Impasse

June 26, 2009

In his presidential address to the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America on June 7th, Terrence Tilley discussed “Three Impasses in Christology”. Tilley is Chair of the Theology Department at Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York. For Tilley, a theological “impasse” is a theological problem which admits of no easy solution, in which two or more sides harden their positions against one another to the point of stalemate, thereby preventing theological progress. The catch in Tilley’s argument is that he identifies one of these “sides” as the Magisterium of the Church!

## The Problem of Fidelity

The exclamation point at the end of that last sentence may not be justified for such a predictable statement. Tilley’s address exemplifies exactly the kind of thorough-going rejection of the Magisterium which we have come to expect in the Western Catholic theological mainstream. The tactic is always the same: Identify the Vatican as simply one of many voices to be heard and then, if it chooses to act decisively, dismiss it as authoritarian and obscurantist. The mind boggles that this attitude can still be found at the core of a presidential address to the CTSA after so many years of utter failure on the CTSA’s part to contribute to any sort of authentically Catholic theological renewal.

That Tilley is still occupied with the going out of business sale at the same old theological store is immediately obvious from the examples he uses in his introduction to illustrate what he means by an impasse hardening into a stalemate. To set the stage for understanding the seriousness of it all, he identifies three larger ecclesial impasses before moving on to his specific Christological concerns. These are:

- “a shrinking and in some places demoralized presbyterate that cannot be enlarged significantly under present rules”
- “a laity that loves the church but has stopped listening to the bishops”
- “a hard-working and loyal body of religious women who are disgusted and discouraged by repeated investigations of religious life and attempted reversals

of self-governance”

But these three problems are not the result of legitimate differences among varying schools of thought; they are rather the direct result of the destruction of the faith of Christians through the rapid secularization of culture in the twentieth century, a destruction marked in each case by a stark refusal to follow the Magisterium of the Church. In other words, the root of these problems is not debatable complexity but simple infidelity.

Thus the crisis in vocations is directly traceable to lack of fidelity, not the refusal to allow priests to marry or to ordain homosexuals (“present rules”). Vocations prosper in dioceses, religious communities and regions which emphasize fidelity to the Magisterium and the spirituality which such fidelity stimulates. The plain fact is that many regions of the United States are now mission territory. Similarly, the failure of the laity to listen to their bishops has been directly proportionate to the secularization of the culture and of the bishops themselves, particularly their own failure to teach sound doctrine, ensure reverent liturgy, and check widespread scandal (problems created in no small part by secularized “theologians”), as well as their penchant for expending their remaining spiritual capital on political rather than religious causes. And perhaps most obviously, the “hard-working and loyal” religious women in Tilley’s analysis are precisely those who have presided over the graying of female religious life by their departure from the original charisms of their founders, their abandonment of Catholic doctrine and spirituality, and their self-absorption in feminism, the New Age, and even Wicca. These communities are seriously ill; if they go much longer without being reformed, they will die.

### **Immutability**

The bulk of Tilley’s address focuses on his three Christological impasses and what to do about them, but these are all variations on the same anti-Magisterial themes. The first impasse is methodological: “The methodological impasse has to do with the starting point of Christology: Does one begin with Scripture and tradition or does one begin with the current situation?” This dilemma—always posed by Modernists—is entirely bogus, for the starting point of all Christology must be Christ Himself, Who can be known only through Revelation as protected and authenticated by the Magisterium of the Church. Using any cultural situation as the starting point of Christology is a recipe for tailoring Christ to fit a particular culture’s extremely limited natural understanding of reality. The

nature of Revelation demands that those limitations be exploded to bring people into contact with the living God, so that both they and their cultures can be conformed to Christ. This does not mean theologians should not seek more effective ways to explain Christ in each cultural situation, but it does mean that in this we are dealing essentially with a problem of communication, not of theology. The Truth can be preserved only by a proper understanding of the difference between the two.

Unsurprisingly, Tilley finds that every time a theologian runs into problems with the Magisterium, it is because he is doing his job exactly as did the great Fathers of the Church, adapting “concepts in use in their culture to express the theological concepts of value to the tradition.” Referring to Roger Haight, SJ and Jon Sobrino, SJ, both of whom have been the focus of negative directives from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Tilley argues that whenever the CDF asserts that some theological work fails to transmit “the immutable sense of the dogmas as understood by the faith of the church” (a phrase taken from the CDF’s judgment on Haight’s work), it is guilty of unfairly preferring just one of the “many varied Christological moments and narratives” found in the New Testament and of insisting that “Christology must be represented in the terms used to inculturate the faith in cultures that exist no longer, terms like *hypostasis*, *physis*, *prosopon*, *persona*, *substantia*...”

At the heart of this absurd assessment of the CDF lies Tilley’s own manifest discomfort with the very idea of “the immutable sense of the dogmas as understood by the faith of the church”. As he repeatedly makes very clear, he much prefers his alleged disparate “patterns” in the New Testament along with various subsequent traditions, any of which a theologian should be completely free to develop as he sees fit, without benefit of Magisterial guidance. Tilley seems completely unaware that, precisely because of the work of the Magisterium over the past two millennia, the Church now understand Revelation more thoroughly and more precisely than did the apostles themselves. Worse, he sometimes seems unaware that there even is a specific immutable content to the Faith which must be preserved. Such lack of awareness is highly suggestive. For Modernists, religion and spirituality derive from the present situation, the *zeitgeist*; indeed, cultural sensibilities largely determine their content. But for Catholics, religion and spirituality derive from a real, identifiable, concrete and specific Revelation, the essential sense of which must be faithfully preserved.

### **Magisterial Uselessness?**

I will pass over Tilley’s second Christological impasse, which is the problem of “how to account for God’s salvific will being effective beyond the community of the baptized”.

This is an intriguing problem with respect to non-Christians in general and Jews in particular, because Jews too were given an authentic Covenant by God. Far from being an impasse, however, this is an area of theology that is being rapidly explored under the increasing guidance of the Magisterium, which has been deeply interested in this question at least since Pope Pius XII. To make it an impasse, we need to find theologians who wish to ignore the light the Magisterium has already shed on the subject. But the bankrupt theological themes I have been highlighting are further illustrated in Tilley's third impasse: "How could Jesus Christ be both divine and human?"

Here again Tilley dismisses the Magisterium and the manner in which its work serves to clarify and authenticate legitimate doctrinal developments, separating them from theological errors. In a display of *hubris* which would astonish were it not so common, Tilley proclaims that even the great Christological decree of the Council of Chalcedon was to no avail: "Chalcedon's 'solution' was hardly a solution," he says. Well, it wasn't a solution if you mean by "solution" a statement with which everyone immediately agrees, for universal agreement is practically impossible. If universal agreement is our goal in reaching a conclusion, two problems arise. First, we must subordinate truth to consensus; second we must be prepared for an infinite dialogue which never determines anything, except perhaps on that fortuitous but unlikely day when nobody is interested in arguing about it. Fortunately, the fundamental role of theology is to explain the Faith properly, not to produce agreement.

It is also true that Chalcedon did not provide a "solution" if by "solution" we mean a complete explanation of a mystery, which is not just practically but theoretically impossible. The Council of Chalcedon did not exhaust our understanding of Jesus Christ, but it did enhance it in a way that, if contradicted or ignored, ensures that our understanding must diminish. Christ, the Council stated, has two natures in one Divine person. *Pace* Tilley, that is not so very difficult to grasp in basic English words in the twenty-first century, with a little study, as long as we understand that it still remains a mystery. But no, as Tilley would have it, the result of Chalcedon was to put the Magisterium in the position of imposing a dubious dyophysite Christology, a tendency still allegedly shared by the CDF today, which in recent notifications appears (to Tilley) "to support a thoroughly Alexandrian understanding and downgrade the Antiochene concerns in the reading of the Chalcedonian symbol." Here come all those competing narratives again: So much to choose from, and so many equal players to do the choosing!

## Luciferian Theology

The longest single section of Tilley's unfortunate address deals with the proper tactics to

use to handle such theological impasses. Tilley's own proposal is that the authorities (the Vatican, the bishops) must dialogue endlessly with theologians until the necessary breakthrough occurs, without regard to the ongoing confusion of the faithful; he appears blissfully unaware that it is precisely the Magisterium of the Church that must determine what is a breakthrough and what is not. Again, the possibility of making progress by consensus is very close to theoretically impossible, but by failing to proceed in this way, the CDF earns Tilley's condemnation for being guilty of the very worst possible failed tactic. I can imagine delivering this part of the speech myself, but only as a delicious parody of the ploys of the heterodox:

The key failed tactic, however, is stopping the dialogue, often done by silencing theologians. The notifications and instructions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith can be and are often helpful theologically and pedagogically. They can and do contribute to continuing dialogue. They can and do demand and deserve the attention of other theologians. But when the Congregation resorts to star-chamber tactics and political sanctions—some direct, some indirect—the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may recapitulate the vicious politics of the early church.... Stopping the dialogue by silencing theologians does not resolve impasse. You can kill theologians, but you cannot silence them.

If there ever were a prejudicially loaded passage, this is it. As long as the CDF is simply one among many players, it may be helpful, but as an expression of the Church's Magisterium its operations rank among the most oppressive injustices in history! In reality, of course, the Vatican corrects very few theologians; you can count the number per year on the merest sliver of your fingernail, which hardly qualifies as "often". Moreover, political sanctions are unknown in the contemporary Church unless, with Tilley, you count ecclesiastical governance as "political". And of course the CDF's deliberations have nothing in common with those of the Star Chamber in the 16th and 17th centuries, nor do they lead to confiscation of property, corporal punishment or execution. But it need hardly be said that Tilley likes to portray faithless theologians as a courageous and beleaguered minority, no matter how much they represent the prevailing secular culture (which, after all, is what they have started with) rather than the Church whose name they repeatedly and unjustly claim. The charge of authoritarian obscurantism continues to play well in the proud West—the same proud West which is rushing boldly into its collective grave with Lucifer's cry of "Non serviam!" on its cultural lips.

## The Real Nature of Theology

Sadly, by reducing the work of theology to exploring this or that “narrative”, Tilley forgets the fundamental principle of Catholic theological interpretation, that each idea in Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium must be understood in such a way that the truth of all the rest is preserved. We are not dealing with many stories but with one story. He also conveniently forgets to distinguish between misunderstandings that can arise between Vatican officials and other theologians on the one hand and a failure of a theologian to be faithful to the defined content of the Faith (that is, to Revelation) on the other. The very nature of theology requires that there be a definitive Revelation to elucidate, a specific content of Faith to explore. It is the function of the Church’s Magisterium—and of the Magisterium alone—to determine what is and what is not compatible with this Revelation, this deposit of Faith.

Indeed, divorced from the Magisterium, theology inevitably loses itself in a welter of competing “narratives”, rendering itself utterly and completely useless. But to hear Tilley tell it, no decision of the Magisterium has ever really resolved anything, for controversies still continue. We may freely grant that there can be very fruitful controversies among different theological schools which propose different approaches to a greater understanding of the content of the Faith. But Tilley fails to acknowledge the far greater problem, namely the frequent controversies between those who accept the dogmas in question as a given—as the central data of their theological work—and those who simply regard them as another set of competing “narratives” which fail to provide a “solution”. Because he wishes not to make that sort of distinction, Tilley would prefer that we judge theological developments over time not by any standard of objective content but by whether they bear fruit among Christians in “faithful discipleship,” in ways of life “that work for justice within the church and the society, that seek reconciliation in a world desperate for healing”. But in Tilley’s code, what might this mean? Usually those who (unlike Benedict XVI) see justice as the primary province of the Church very frequently end up judging Christianity by whether it supports the latest fashionable causes. In the United States, for example, think of determining authentic theology by how well it supports the platform of the Democratic Party.

Tilley seems not to understand that there can be neither justice nor reconciliation unless we first understand what is just and what is unjust, what is good and what is evil, what our purpose is and how it is enabled, Who it is who saves us from all our failures, shortcomings and sins, and how. Our Lord said that if we were His disciples we would know the truth and the truth will set us free (Jn 8:31-32). He prayed that His Father

would consecrate (or sanctify) us in truth (Jn 17:17). St. Paul used the term “truth” more than fifty times in his epistles, making it the touchstone of his evangelization. In the New Testament, Luke, John, Paul, James and Peter all insist that the Christian life must be lived, first and foremost, in the Truth. (Matthew and Mark also report that Christ was recognized as one who teaches what is true.) Christ’s truth consists in a grasp of a reality far larger than ourselves, larger than our own desires and plans, larger than our cultures. Despite all the unfortunate conflicts and misunderstandings which can occur in the course of ecclesiastical governance, it is only the Magisterium of the Church—sometimes through directives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith officially approved by the Pope—that can guarantee the propositional content of this Truth.

By now the reader may wonder why I am paying so much attention to one speech by one obscure theologian at one university “in the Jesuit tradition” in New York City. It is because this was the presidential address of the CTSA, and it strongly suggests that the Catholic Theological Society of America is still living largely in the late 1960’s, and still attempting to preserve an already overlong intellectual adolescence, eagerly supposing reality to be whatever we want it to be. It is very sad for a theologian to attempt to explain gross infidelity to Revelation in terms of competing narratives. In fact it is absurdly sad. For without the deposit of Faith guaranteed by Church authority, Catholic theology loses both its identity and its value. This means that the only real impasse in theology is rejection of the Magisterium, an obstacle that cannot be overcome without conversion, an obstacle that guarantees the death of theology as a legitimate and fruitful discipline. Garbage in, garbage out. In the end, it all comes down to this.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=328>

# Continuing in Austria: Modernist Abuse of Vatican II

November 07, 2011

If you look at today's report of [new dissidence in Austria](#), you'll see yet another example of the Modernist abuse of the Second Vatican Council. Hans Peter Hurka, the leader of the We Are Church movement there, claims his group will conduct liturgical ceremonies in which lay persons act as priests. He understands that this violates current Church law, but claims it is in accordance with the teachings of Vatican II.

Oh, really?

In several very explicit documents, Vatican II carefully delineated the most complete magisterial understanding in history of the role of bishops, of priests, and of the laity in the Church. These documents include in the first place the Council's central text, often described as the very key to the Council, namely [Lumen Gentium](#) (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church). In addition there are three smaller and more particular decrees: [Christus Dominus](#) (Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church), [Presbyterorum Ordinis](#) (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests), and [Apostolicam Actuositatem](#) (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity).

Now nowhere in any of these documents will you find any confusion of the roles of bishops, priests and laity. Nor will you find any such confusion in Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#). With respect to the claims of the We Are Church movement, we would surely expect to find something in this document through which the Council fathers outlined the renewal of the liturgy, of which they stated: "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows" (10).

But instead, it was precisely here that the Council fathers called particular attention to the necessity of the priest:

To accomplish so great a work [*i.e.*, the work of salvation] Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass not only in the person of his minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross," but especially in the Eucharistic species. (7)

Note those words: “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross.”

How sad then that it has always been a hallmark of Modernism to seek to obliterate the distinction of roles among the various members of the Body of Christ! This, no doubt, puts Modernists in tune with the religious impulses of a democratic age, impulses they hope to rule through their own magisterium of academic expertise. In any case, we are too familiar with the long effort to push the laity into formal liturgical roles, as if this is normal to their state in life, and to reduce priests and bishops to the role of “presiders”, lest an authentic sacramental authority should hold sway.

Yet there is no warrant for this effort anywhere in the Council documents. The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* makes it quite clear that the special province of the laity in the Lord’s work of evangelization and sanctification is “the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel” (2). And in direct contrast, the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* insists:

The same Lord, however, has established ministers among His faithful to unite them together in one body in which, “not all the members have the same function” (Rom. 12:4). These ministers in the society of the faithful are able by the sacred power of orders to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins, and they perform their priestly office publicly for men in the name of Christ. Therefore, having sent the apostles just as He Himself had been sent by the Father, Christ, through the apostles themselves, made their successors, the bishops, sharers in His consecration and mission. The office of their ministry has been handed down, in a lesser degree indeed, to the priests. Established in the order of the priesthood they can be co-workers of the episcopal order for the proper fulfillment of the apostolic mission entrusted to priests by Christ. (2)

Thus it is through the sacrament of Holy Orders that “priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are signed with a special character and are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person of Christ the Head” (2).

In point of fact, a layman cannot act in the person of Christ the Head to present again the atoning Sacrifice of Our Lord and Savior, or to confect the Eucharist so that we may all be fed on His Body and Blood. To seek to put lay persons into this role is to desire a final end to Christ’s sacrifice, and a definitive separation of the People of God from the very food which makes of us the Body of Christ. Such a desire is the direct opposite of

what the Second Vatican Council sought—that same Council which understood the Church could do nothing without the ongoing liturgical action of Our Blessed Lord acting in and through His priests.

One can reread the documents to grow in faith and understanding—or perhaps just to give the lie to Hans Peter Hurka, which surely must in some parallel universe be almost as fine a motive. As a time-saver, I call to your attention the short essays I wrote last year on the documents of Vatican II, with extensive quotations. Those listed below address the portions of the documents cited here, and the entire set is available as an eBook, [The Documents of the Second Vatican Council: A Summary and Guide](#).

In any case, we must all learn to recognize this Modernist tactic of claiming the Second Vatican Council as justification for the latest Modernist desires. For Modernists, Vatican II is never about what the Council fathers actually said, but only about what they “meant” or what they “would have said if they had not been afraid to say it” or what they “would certainly say now if they could meet again under our tutelage” (rather than that of the Holy Spirit). For Modernists, in fact, Vatican II is nothing but a metaphor, a filmy gauze of aspirations tending to confirm the worldly choices they have already made. For Modernists, then, Vatican II is in the end anything they might want it to be except a fixed text. Perhaps this explains, among many other things, why they never quote it.

### **For Reference:**

- [Vatican II on the Church: The Bishops](#)
- [Vatican II on Bishops: The Bishops Themselves](#)
- [Vatican II on Bishops: Episcopal Collaborators](#)
- [Vatican II on Priests: Priestly Ministry](#)
- [Vatican II on Priests: Priestly Life](#)
- [Vatican II on the Lay Apostolate: Mission](#)
- [Vatican II on the Lay Apostolate: Implementation](#)
- [The Documents of the Second Vatican Council: A Summary and Guide \(eBook\)](#)

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=887>

# The Cautionary End of the Spirit of Vatican II

January 17, 2008

A priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Fr. Paul Stanosz, has written a fascinating article for *Commonweal* on clerical morale, but it is fascinating only because it reveals far more than the author intends (see [The Other Health Crisis: Why Priests Are Coping Poorly](#), 11/23/2007). As *Commonweal* was one of the first magazines to join the counter-magisterium of Catholic intellectuals in the 1960's, I haven't paid much attention to it for a very long time. But this article unintentionally demonstrates an extremely important spiritual point.

“The Other Health Crisis” begins by documenting the problems afflicting the author's own archdiocese, along with the impact of these problems on priestly morale, emotional stability and physical health. The assumption is that these problems are universal, but the article ignores the special character of the Milwaukee archdiocese which, during the long critical period leading up to the present crisis, was shaped and staffed by the most prominent of episcopal dissenters, Rembert Weakland, a bishop who was also reportedly an active homosexual who misused diocesan funds in a vain attempt to permanently conceal his extra-curricular activities. It is therefore no surprise that Milwaukee is laboring under the impact of a severe decline in vocations, a confused spirituality, and monumental sex abuse damages; one is tempted to believe the church in Milwaukee has reaped what it has sown. But though extreme, Milwaukee is hardly alone in its problems, and I don't want to be too quick to dismiss the article's thesis. That thesis is clear and simple: There is far more responsible for the decline of Catholicism in America than poor doctrinal, moral and spiritual leadership on the part of bishops and priests.

## Unstoppable Trends

The argument runs like this: Catholicism has been adversely affected by the larger social trends characteristic of the vast cultural shift in America beginning in the 1960's. There has been a general trend toward secularization, a declining interest in religion, reduced rates of Church attendance, and a failure to learn the basis of traditional beliefs and

values—all large cultural factors which the Church cannot be said to have caused, but with which her ministers must daily attempt to cope. The author is surely correct to note this larger cultural aspect of our religious problems, and he is also correct to observe that, starting in the 1960's, Catholics took advantage of their rapidly expanding opportunities to enter the mainstream, often at the cost of their spiritual identity.

But by “Catholics” in this context, the article seems to mean only the laity, and entirely on their own. In fact bishops and priests, who should have known better, also often rushed into the mainstream at the cost of their Catholic identity, shepherding many others to do the same. And what is curious about Fr. Stanosz’ analysis is not its identification of these large cultural factors, but its failure to envision any possible alternative response on the part of the Church. For Stanosz both implicitly and explicitly assumes that there is nothing the Church could have done to deal more effectively with the cultural crisis, and that there is nothing the Church can possibly do now to make things any better. Thus he rapidly dismisses the “alleged dilution of Catholicism” during this same period (note the term *alleged*), and he carelessly exhorts us to “stop blaming Vatican II or the bumbling bishops who shielded pedophiles and failed to protect children” (note the assumption that most critics blame Vatican II rather than those who distorted it; note also how the subject of episcopal bumbling is neatly exhausted by the shielding of pedophiles). Finally, he insists “we should avoid blithely scapegoating ‘the culture of death’ and the evil of the secular world” (I love the use of the words *blithely* and *scapegoating*).

My point is not to damn the author’s outrageous prose with faint praise. Rather, I wish to note his deep conviction that there is quite simply nothing to be done. After all, he has already written off the following: an undiluted presentation of the Faith, a proper implementation of the vision of the Second Vatican Council, insistence on strong and competent bishops, and any sort of deep opposition to secularization in general and the culture of death in particular. So what is left? Failure is the only remaining possibility, and the article is explicit on this point. There are “large social, cultural, and economic forces” at work in the decline of Catholicism, and “that decline is not about to reverse itself”. Priests can never be happy and whole again until they recognize this inescapable fact and so cut themselves some slack. “I’m not advocating apathy,” says Fr. Stanosz, “I’m merely recognizing that the decline began before me and will continue after me.” And so on to the inevitable conclusion: “To restore health to our pastoral function, we priests first need to admit our own pain and disorientation in a foundering church.”

## Wisdom and Foolishness

Don't get me wrong. Being a priest must certainly intensify the struggle and frequent disappointment of being a Christian. But a proper spirituality includes the important understanding that the economy of salvation is more complex than we ourselves can ever imagine. Sometimes one person sows—and sows very well indeed—but it is still another who reaps. On the human level, this is disappointing. If Fr. Stanosz were offering advice to younger priests and seminarians in a faithful journal such as *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, we might consider him wise indeed to restrain the impetuosity of the young by reminding them that they will neither always see the fruits of their labors nor always understand how and when the graces they merit are applied. But even so, they must remain confident that through conformity with Christ their lives will bear great fruit. What ultimately matters is not measurable results but conformity with Christ.

This is wisdom indeed, but Fr. Stanosz is instead writing for a bastion of dissidence called *Commonweal*, and he in fact concludes that there is nothing to be done. I said at the outset that this article was fascinating precisely because it reveals more than it intends. In exploring its thesis, I have already hinted at what is being revealed, partly through my parenthetical comments on some of the alternative ideas the author so “blithely” discounts or rejects. What is really going on here is the working out to its inevitable conclusion of a bankrupt but widespread mindset which we might justly call the Milwaukee mindset, because it is so well symbolized by the story of the church in Milwaukee. But this is really just another name for the false spirit of Vatican II. What I mean will become clear as we examine an important thread that runs throughout “The Other Health Crisis”.

The beginning of the thread is the author's observation, in describing the current failure of priestly morale, that there is a growing polarization between recently-ordained and long-time priests, “what some call JP II priests and Vatican II priests, respectively.” Now every active Catholic who has lived above ground for the past generation knows that these two terms are codes. John Paul II waged a long and uphill battle to reclaim the true meaning of the Second Vatican Council from those who used the so-called “spirit of Vatican II” as an excuse for deliberately fostering within the Church precisely what Fr. Stanosz describes as an insurmountable external cultural and social trend: The dilution of the spirit of Catholicism to accommodate the spirit of the times.

### Speaking in Code

Thus, for a “Vatican II” priest like Fr. Stanosz, the term “JP II priest” is code for a priest who is a throwback to the pre-conciliar age, a cultural misfit who rejects the “spirit” of Vatican II which must necessarily guide our lives, and a deeply flawed man who cannot

possibly relate positively to anybody. But the real decoded difference between a “Vatican II” priest and a “John Paul II” priest is actually the difference between those who have never taken the letter of Vatican II to heart and those who have. Instead of mining the Council documents for the serious spiritual challenge they proposed, the so-called Vatican II priest too often served the spirit of the age under the Council’s name. This provided an exhilarating opportunity to profess Christ without being flushed out of the mainstream and to put faith in programs and processes instead of spiritual growth and holiness, or, putting it more simply, to attempt to have one’s cake and eat it too. In contrast, the so-called John Paul II priest has followed the vicar of Christ in seeking to implement what the Council actually said, which was centered not on the transformation of Christ to suit the self and the world, but on the transformation of both the self and the world to suit Christ.

For a generation and more, “Vatican II” bishops and “Vatican II” priests called for ever more accommodation with the mainstream, ever increasing bureaucratic programs, and ever less prayer, devotion, and sacrifice. Whenever anyone called for what we might call good old Catholic muscle (traditional understandings of sin and grace restated and developed to face contemporary challenges), their suggestions were rejected and ridiculed as products of a bygone age. It is this vision of a sophisticated, secularized and thoroughly “up-to-date” Church and priesthood that is symbolized by Milwaukee, and which constitutes the unfortunate Milwaukee mindset that permeates the entire article.

Do you think I am too quick to judge? Consider how consistent the “coded” language is throughout. The author begins with the same psychological canards (also code phrases) which have been used frequently during the post-Conciliar period to force men of traditional Catholic spirituality out of our seminaries. Noting the recent influx of “JP II” priests, he immediately asserts that simply ordaining more priests will not solve the problem. Here’s why:

Bishops in recent years have been too quick to fill seminaries with fervent men who may or may not have genuine vocations. As a result, our seminaries now house a new breed of unsuitable candidates, men with poor relational and leadership skills. Ordained into a U.S. church that is losing its vitality, these men often seek to turn back the clock by embracing disciplines and devotional practices that flourished in the middle of the last century.

A strong vertical spirituality is a confirmed horizontalist’s nightmare, and so it is invariably dismissed in Modernist psycho-babble as indicating “poor relational and

leadership skills.”

### **Caricatures and False Opposites**

Next the author cites his own sociological work (another academic discipline which, in the wrong hands, has been used to redefine the Faith to suit common patterns established by the lukewarm). He recalls as a sort of overwhelming statistical trend the many priestly candidates he has interviewed “who see the priesthood as a refuge” where “their personal limitations and modest abilities are no obstacle”. These men are too often “filled with a sense of their own sacred status, and are prone to conflict with the laity and fellow priests.” His research suggests that such men are likely to become unhappy and disgruntled. This too is code. For example, the phrase “prone to conflict with” most often really means “prone to challenge”.

We may all readily grant that some few candidates lack spiritual depth and wish to “escape” into the priesthood because they can’t make it anywhere else, or that a few others have an unhealthy (*i.e.*, purely artistic or sentimental) attachment to older forms of spirituality. May we not assume, however, that the author is very likely objecting to such relics of devotional practice as Benediction, Eucharistic adoration, the Stations of the Cross, the Rosary, prayers to the saints, or even older liturgical forms, all of which are still supposed to be a vibrant part of the life of the Church? Indeed, Fr. Stanosz wields a very broad brush. Is it necessarily (or even probably) true that a seminarian with a strong sense of the sacred character of the priesthood must have a false sense of his own self-worth? Is it not possible that he understands that his very identity will be changed by ordination, that he will be empowered through his priestly identification with Christ to bring great grace to others without expecting better treatment than his Master?

To his credit, Fr. Stanosz is “not convinced” that the current progressive agenda of women’s ordination, married clergy, same-sex unions and permissible abortion will be able to revive the Church, but instead of understanding this as the last tortured gasp of the Milwaukee mindset, he can only contrast it with what he regards as an equally doomed opposite, a “return to preconciliar practices,” as if this is the essence of the John Paul II priest (and as if, even were it so, it is just as bad as abortion and same-sex marriage offered under the Catholic name).

### **Repentance or Despair?**

What are we to make of an article which, in the process of concluding that there is nothing to be done, displays such an animus against precisely those spiritual solutions which have ever been at the heart of a vibrant Catholicism? What does it all mean?

That's the question which makes the article so fascinating, the question to which it is critical to understand the answer. For what it all means is that the Milwaukee mindset is so far gone in its sins that the only way open is despair. The so-called spirit of Vatican II which has wielded such a terrible power for the past forty years was nothing more than a euphoric baptism of secular utopianism. After such a long and continuous demonstration of its bankruptcy, many of its proponents have prudently stopped calling for more of the same. One might now hope for self-understanding, repentance and true renewal. But if our *Commonweal* article is any guide—and I believe it is—what we are witnessing instead is the only result consistent with a lack of repentance, that is, despair.

I want to pause here to emphasize that what makes Fr. Stanosz' article so important is not that one can completely understand and pigeon-hole the author from a single article, as if authors have no more personal complexity than appears in any one thing they write. Rather, what is important is that the article itself brilliantly illustrates the inevitable unfolding of the false spirit of Vatican II, the completely predictable devolution of that spirit into the only thing ever promised by its ultimate author. This is the reason I have gone on at three times the length of what is normally a brief column. We have here a lesson that every Christian who is still standing must learn if he hopes to escape the same dreadful consequence. Again I say it: this is the lesson of despair.

Fr. Stanosz may be right to see that "an aging presbyterate should not exhaust itself in implementing new programs that are at best only Band-Aids" (indeed, such programs are often based on the substitution of managed processes for spiritual challenges). But that is all he sees. If all the precious vision statements and bureaucratic programs to which he has committed his life are bankrupt, then we are not surprised to find he now has a personal interest in proving every other path to be even worse. If the Milwaukee mindset couldn't super-charge priests and fill churches, then nothing can. This is the full argument to which we are treated in "The Other Health Crisis". There is no hope; there can be no hope; any priest who has hope is in denial, and "the greatest threat to a priest's well-being is denial." Who is it then who poses the real danger for our author? Unsurprisingly, the target is the same as it always was in the Milwaukee mindset: "We priests know we are in trouble...and the forced optimism of those afraid of appearing insufficiently orthodox—or disloyal to Rome—strikes me as a failure of perception, honesty, and faith."

After all, what explanation other than fear could there be for fidelity to Rome and the positive spiritual outlook that goes with it? This too is Milwaukee mindset code, this too is the common parlance of the spirit of Vatican II. And for any who still doubt, consider Fr. Stanosz' final advice to priests as they all wait for a brighter day when the inexorable

cultural and social processes will be more favorable:

In the meantime, we must learn to be a different kind of church. We've made progress in overcoming our pretensions to being a triumphal, all-knowing, sinless church. But more progress remains to be made; and paradoxically, it begins with acknowledging—and in a certain sense accepting—the decline of U.S. Catholicism.

### Hope in Christ

I suppose we have effectively overcome perceptions of a sinless church by sinning, and we ought to do more of the same. But let it go. See how the de-triumphalizing of the Church (which is yet more code) is now a key to a different lock. The abolition of “triumphalism” was originally sold as the key to the Church's broader appeal and influence; now it is hawked as the key to reducing our aspirations so we can be content with failure. On this reading, all aspirations are triumphal. After all, as Fr. Stanosz points out in a passage more decisive than he knows, not even John Paul II could fill the churches, and “the new evangelization he called for remains to be undertaken.” We have already been told that the “decline is not about to reverse itself”—it “began before me and will continue after me.” The new evangelization cannot even be contemplated until the insurmountable cultural and social forces change, at which time “Catholicism will evolve.”

Paradoxically, this is the most revealing point of all, and it may serve as a fitting conclusion. For the most important difference between the priests of the Milwaukee mindset and the “fervent men” with whom the bishops are now “too quick to fill seminaries” is that the old guard believes successful evangelization must be the product of the cultural shifts and social trends in which they have always put their trust. But priests of Faith calculate the odds differently, for they do not doubt that the one they serve has overcome the world—and all its social trends, and all its empty promises. So when priests of Faith consider this impossible work of evangelization, they hear the Master asking: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Is 6:8) And to this they give an answer which makes dust and ashes of the Milwaukee mindset, an answer so simple, direct and daring that it bypasses argument and cannot be rationalized away, an answer by which they cast themselves into the deep for no other reason than to obey the will of God: Here I am! Send me.

View this item on [CatholicCulture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org):

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=230>

# TRADITIONALISM

# On Waffling, Tradition, and the Magisterium

September 23, 2009

Over the past week or two, I've had a fascinating yet frustrating exchange with a priest on the question of whether CatholicCulture.org is "waffling" on Church affairs when it is willing to criticize prudential decisions and strategies of modern popes and bishops while fully accepting the modern Magisterium. By modern, I mean of course the Magisterium from the Second Vatican Council to the present.

There is no question that this priest is concerned about our good and the good of the Church. He was responding to my fund-raising messages, and he was simply making clear that he could not support us unless we quit "waffling". In his mind, we "waffled" when we failed to admit that the Magisterium of the Church has contradicted itself in modern times, and that when this happens, Tradition must be our guide to the truth. "Tradition", he maintained, "is God's gift to keep us on track."

## An Uncatholic Position

I replied repeatedly but in vain that his position was not Catholic. It is, in fact, heretical. But his statement at least provides the benefit of clarity, for if I might be permitted a small flight of intuition, it seems to me that this is precisely what Traditionalists typically believe, even when they are trying their hardest to prove that nothing that either the Second Vatican Council or subsequent popes have taught has been expressed with the full weight of Magisterial authority.

Knowing from past correspondence that not everyone uses the term "Traditionalism" in the same way, I hasten here to define it as a position that rejects the contemporary exercise of the Magisterium in favor of a prior understanding of what the Catholic Tradition demands. In other words, I am not referring to those Catholics who, in complete fidelity to the Magisterium at all times, believe that a greater emphasis on traditional ideas and disciplines will be far better for the Church. These, among all others who hold different but equally obedient views, I call simply "Catholics".

Having clarified my terminology, the insight I wish to propose is that, whether they argue that the teachings of Vatican II and modern popes on certain neuralgic points are

non-Magisterial, or that the current line of apparent popes is bogus, or that the recent Magisterium has in fact contradicted earlier authoritative teachings, all Traditionalists who reject post-1960 conciliar and papal teachings, including their authority over the liturgy, uniformly behave as if they believe that “Tradition is God’s gift to keep us on track.” Let’s take a quick look at why this is not only wrong, but actually impossible.

A sound, well-formed Catholic will immediately realize that a proper formulation of the Catholic position on this question runs as follows:

Scripture and Tradition are the two sources of Revelation. While all may draw on their riches, the Magisterium of the Church alone possesses the power of Christ to interpret Scripture and Tradition rightly, to correctly affirm what Scripture and Tradition affirm, to correctly condemn what Scripture and Tradition condemn, and to faithfully elaborate their meaning. Since Scripture and Tradition are properly termed sources of Revelation, they cannot also serve as guides to their own self-interpretation, whereas the Magisterium is properly termed a sure guide, and is in fact the guarantor of the meaning of both. Thus it is the Magisterium that is “God’s gift to keep us on track.”

In contrast, for Traditionalists the role of the Magisterium is usurped by one of the two sources of Revelation, namely Tradition.

### **The Nature of the Error**

I have long maintained that this alteration of the role of Tradition is simply the Protestant error affixed to a different personality type. For the Protestant very clearly holds that “Scripture is God’s gift to keep us on track.” Indeed, just as the Protestant believes that the meaning of Scripture is clear and open to all, and so is sufficient to protect us from error, so too does the Traditionalist believe that the meaning of Tradition is clear and open to all, and so is sufficient to protect us from error. But it is necessary to note to the contrary that the meaning of Scripture and Tradition are very frequently unclear. Moreover, different aspects of both seem more or less clear to different people at different times, and in different cultures which occupy different historical, geographical and even psychological and mental space. But even setting this obvious rejoinder aside, it is immediately obvious that both the Protestant and the Traditionalist share a common procedural method, the method Catholics call “private judgment.”

Just as the Protestant is more than willing to affirm the “plain meaning” of Scripture against the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, so too is the Traditionalist more than

willing to affirm the “plain meaning” of Tradition against any contemporary exercise of the Magisterium which contradicts his own judgment of what that “plain meaning” might be. Now, in the Traditionalist’s defense, one must recognize that prior statements of the Magisterium constitute part of any legitimate understanding of Tradition, and this does pose a problem when a more recent statement of the Magisterium appears to contradict what has been taught earlier.

In response to this problem, I have consistently insisted that it is necessary for Catholics to also accept the “living Magisterium” of the Church, and not just past Magisterial statements. My priest correspondent asserted that this was a “Modernist” concept, but by “living” I do not mean “changing in meaning”. What I mean is that the exercises of the Magisterium we are most directly called by Christ to obey are those that speak to us in our own time to correct our own errors. Just as it is not obedience for a child to use his understanding of previous paternal instruction to reject the current command of his living father, so too it is not obedience for a Catholic to use his understanding of previous Magisterial teaching to reject an unwelcome teaching of the Magisterium when it exercises its authority here and now.

Someone may object that a father can give a contradictory command, and this is true, but our logic is perfect in the case of the Magisterium precisely because the Magisterium of the Church cannot contradict itself. Therefore, no matter how much it may seem to us to do so, it is absolutely essential for the Catholic to assume that whenever a conflict appears to arise, it is his own misunderstanding of the matter which creates that appearance of conflict. The confusion is with the individual Catholic, not with the Magisterium. For it is impossible, without eliminating the essential character of Catholicism and making it a religion just like any other, with no guarantee of truth, to hold that the Magisterium of the Church can be self-contradictory over time. (One might also note in passing that if this were possible, we would have absolutely no legitimate basis for preferring either the earlier or the later teaching.)

### **The Only Solution**

Therefore, when any Catholic notices an appearance of conflict, one of four things must be true: (1) The Catholic is assigning some earlier document(s) an authority they do not possess; (2) The Catholic is assigning some later document(s) an authority they do not possess; (3) The Catholic misunderstands one or more of the documentary authorities in question; or (4) The Catholic’s understanding of the “plain meaning” of tradition is, in fact, incorrect. To correct it, he must adjust his understanding in such a way that all statements of the Magisterium which bear on the question at hand are acknowledged to

be true.

This final point is exactly the same as what Catholics always enjoin upon Protestants in the interpretation of Scripture: Only that understanding of Scripture can be true which admits the truth of all the passages that bear upon the issue, as well as the applicable truths we derive from Tradition, and also the truth of everything the Magisterium has taught to clarify either Tradition or Scripture on this issue. For Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium are all guaranteed by the same Spirit of Truth. In the same way, on any given point, only that understanding of Tradition can be true which admits the truth of everything in Tradition revealed upon this point, and also of all Scriptural passages which bear upon it, and finally of every statement of the Magisterium which similarly addresses the issue at hand. And just as the Magisterium is the final arbiter of what truths are actually contained in Scripture, so too she is the final arbiter of what truths we may legitimately derive from Tradition.

It goes without saying that none of this touches the very important question of whether the policies and strategies of any particular set of popes or bishops have been wise, prudent or salutary. Nor does it deny the real problems created for the Church when she allows herself to be too much shaped by men and women of weak faith, or those who are far too secular in their habits of thought, or those who actually hold the errors of Modernism. Nor does it exonerate ecclesiastical authority from its consistent contemporary failure to discipline. But neither practical wisdom, nor prudence, nor effective discipline, nor a certain percentage of sound priests and bishops, nor good results are essential to the identity of the Catholic Church. Hence none of these things is protected by the Holy Spirit.

But the truth about faith and morals is essential. It is therefore guaranteed by a living and infallible authority, the same as when Christ walked on this earth. This is why my correspondent is so very seriously wrong, so wrong, in fact, that he has unknowingly created, for himself and for those who share his ideas, a Catholicism in name only, without its essential note of authority, which is actually a different religion. It may seem refreshingly dogmatic, but unfortunately it has no warrant to dogmatize. Through its rejection of the Magisterium whole and entire, it has become purely human, completely fallible and—in its soul if not yet in all its externals—already wrong.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=345>

# Conflicting Teachings of the Magisterium?

February 12, 2009

The doctrinal issues which divide the Society of St. Pius X and other Traditionalists from the Church are all rooted in the perception that, in the second half of the twentieth century and particularly at the Second Vatican Council, the Magisterium of the Church has contradicted its earlier teachings. There are three key areas of perceived conflict: (1) Traditionalists allege that Vatican II's teaching on religious liberty contradicts earlier teachings; (2) They allege that Vatican II's teaching on ecumenism contradicts earlier teachings; and (3) They allege that Vatican II's teaching that the Church of Christ "subsists in" the Catholic Church contradicts earlier teachings which tended to use "is" where Vatican II used "subsists in".

## The Ongoing Magisterium

It is not possible in one column to study these three issues in detail, and in any case two of the three have since been clearly addressed by the ongoing Magisterium of the Church. To those with open minds, for example, any misunderstanding of the third issue was (or should have been) put to rest by the clarifications issued under Benedict XVI by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2007 (see [Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church](#) and [Commentary on the Document: Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church](#)). Similarly, the misunderstanding of the second issue should have been swept away by Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical [That They May Be One \(Ut Unum Sint\)](#) and by his promulgation in 2000 of the CDF's very pointed document [On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church \(Dominus Iesus\)](#).

The Magisterium has also consistently upheld Vatican II's teachings on religious liberty in *Dignitatis Humanae* as not only compatible with previous Catholic teachings but as requiring the assent of the faithful. In this case, however, we have had no further Magisterial presentation of the precise manner in which all the various statements on religious liberty are to be understood when taken together. However, many faithful scholars have shown how these teachings can be seen to fit with each other, including the

late theologian and Scripture scholar Fr. William Most, Christendom College's chairman of Theology William Marshner, and Fr. Brian Harrison, who has devoted years of research and writing to this question. Recognizing the renewed interest in this subject in the wake of Pope Benedict's efforts to bring the episcopal leaders of the SSPX into full communion with the Church, CatholicCulture.org is currently digitizing the relevant essays and articles of these and other authors, and we will call them to the attention of our users as soon as they are available.

### **Proper Procedure**

At the present moment I merely wish to point out the proper way to proceed in such matters. The question of religious liberty is an excellent case study because we do not necessarily yet know the best method of explaining all the relevant texts. Various scholars have shown several different ways in which the texts can be understood so that the full truth of each is upheld. But one of these arguments may ultimately prove to be more accurate than the others, or new developments may show that an as yet unforeseen approach will yield still richer fruit.

One is reminded of the rivals who challenged Chesterton's famous fictional detective Fr. Brown, insisting that a particular crime was so impossible that it must have a supernatural cause. When Fr. Brown demurred, they dared him to show how the crime could have been committed by human agency. Fr. Brown immediately demonstrated that it was not at all difficult to see any number of ways in which the available evidence could be pieced together to make a whole, and he proceeded to reel off several possible solutions in short order. The difficulty, he noted, lies not in imagining various ways in which it could be done, but in knowing for certain the one way in which it really was done. So too, the teachings on religious liberty have been repeatedly shown to be easily reconciled in various ways; but the Church has not yet said which of these ways, if any, produces the most perfect understanding of the question.

Concerning the authenticity and truth of all the relevant Magisterial statements, this situation does not provide the least occasion for concern. Throughout history, it has been not at all uncommon to find teachings of the Magisterium which appear, at first glance, to contradict some aspect of earlier teachings. Consider the Christological controversies, in which the Church had to assert that Christ was both true God and true man! Nor is it uncommon to find two statements in Scripture that appear to contradict each other, or even two (or more) statements by Our Lord and Savior Himself. All of these teachings are equally inspired by the Holy Spirit, leaving no doubt of their veracity. What is required is to understand all of the teachings properly, holding each in the correct

relationship to the others, discerning which aspects of the general topic they address, and determining precisely what they say (rather than making lazy or opinionated assumptions about what they “must” mean). Once the proper understanding is achieved, everything fits. When it comes to Christ, Scripture and the Magisterium, everything *always* fits.

### Scriptural Analogy

If a man first reads the passages in Scripture in which St. Paul says that “the just shall live by faith” (see, for example, Rom 1:17 and Gal 3:11) and the same man later comes across that passage in St. James which asks, “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?” (see Jas 2:14 and the whole chapter), he will be very foolish indeed if he rushes out to proclaim to the world that Holy Scripture contradicts itself. And he will be just as foolish (as was Martin Luther) if he decides that the canonical book which contradicts his own understanding (in Luther’s case, *The Letter of James*) is not true Scripture and must be torn out of the Bible. Or to take another case: Since Jesus said “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt 10:34), should we contend that Our Lord contradicted Himself when he later stated, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (Jn 14:27)? No, we simply assume we have some work to do, that we must deepen our understanding to see how all of Our Lord’s statements on a given issue are fully, equally and absolutely true at the same time.

Through the authority vested in the Church by Christ Himself, who gave Peter the power of the Keys; who gave the power to bind and loose to all the apostles with Peter; who asserted that He who hears them hears Him; who told Peter He had prayed for him that his faith might not fail, so that he in turn could confirm his brothers; and who promised to be with His Church until the end of time—by this authority of the very Word of God, the Magisterium speaks with the same inspiration of the Holy Spirit as does Scripture. We may not always understand how all of its teachings fit together. We may have a good deal of study to do to understand everything properly. But we may be certain that every Magisterial teaching is true.

Jesus Christ is never self-contradictory, not while He walked on earth, and not while He speaks through His Church. It is, in fact, a great folly—a folly which betrays either a lack of Faith or a lack of humility—to assert that the Magisterium has contradicted itself, or that the Magisterium is not really the Magisterium when it teaches something that goes against one’s own understanding of an issue. For to say these things of the Magisterium is to say them of Christ Himself—Christ united with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=300>

# Drinking the Kool Aid on Vatican II

February 15, 2010

Some of the responses I've received to my ongoing review of the documents of the Second Vatican Council have reminded me of the remarkable shallowness with which Vatican II has been received on all sides of the spectrum. The amount of Kool Aid of the Vatican II flavor that continues to be consumed in the Western Church is staggering. This column is for all those who are still sipping such poorly flavored sugar-water. What I have to say may make some readers very angry. In fact, I rather hope it does.

I'll begin with just one caveat. It is one of the difficulties of an organization like Trinity Communications that its work is often read and sometimes pondered by Catholics who tend to reject or distrust Vatican II based primarily on what has come after it. But our work is seldom read, and certainly never pondered, by those who have falsely used Vatican II to cause what has come after it. What has come after the Council, at least to a considerable extent in the West, is a remaking of the Church in the image of those who have falsely appropriated the Council for their own purposes, an image of Modernism or "Catholic secularism". I say this is a difficulty faced by Trinity Communications because it means that people like me sometimes end up yelling at conservative Catholics whose beliefs and attitudes are very close to our own. At the same time, I may seem temporarily to ignore those who have done their best to wreck the late 20th century Church in the West.

But sometimes yelling is in order, and my yelling today recognizes and even presupposes all the harm the Modernist-secularists have done. The flea I want to put in the "conservative" Catholic ear is that those who distrust Vatican II should be ashamed of themselves for having drunk the Modernist Kool Aid. My thesis is that precisely because the Modernists have been so successful in ascribing their diabolical influence on the Church to Vatican II, some conservative Catholics actually believe this must be true. They believe or at least seriously suspect that there must have been something fundamentally wrong with the Second Vatican Council.

Never was there a clearer case of Kool Aid poisoning. The Second Vatican Council was an ecumenical council of all the bishops of the world in union with the Pope, the largest ecumenical council in the history of the Church. Therefore, the presumption—no, the certainty—is that the Council was the setting for a remarkable outpouring of the

Holy Spirit, giving rise ultimately to decisions which were guided by the Holy Spirit for the good of the Church.

I don't mean to claim that every bit of pastoral advice enshrined in the Council documents must infallibly work out to the benefit of everyone in the Church throughout the world. That depends on too many variables, and on the unwillingness of huge numbers of people to be docile to the Holy Spirit, as by now we have certainly seen. Nor do I mean to claim that all of the Council fathers were above seeking to insert phrases into the text which resonated with their own pet theories, the easier to trot them out later for their own programs. Such textual tugs of war, both open and cleverly hidden, have gone on at every council. Not infrequently do they muddy the waters of interpretation here and there. Indeed, gratuitous interpretations are most easily avoided by the application of what Pope Benedict has described as a hermeneutic of continuity. This too applies to all Magisterial documents in all ages.

But I do mean to say that the influence of the Holy Spirit is not limited to infallible definitions. As Catholics, we are obliged to believe and trust that the pastoral advice of an ecumenical council is sound advice for the times—certainly far sounder than our own little ideas about what we'd like to see done.

I beg you to hold this thought, because if you can't hold it, you're essentially a Protestant, and you've developed an unfortunate fondness for private judgment. And while you're holding it, I'd like to debunk a few myths about Vatican II which will make it easier for you to hold it in the future. For reasons of space, I'll debunk just three of these myths today.

### **Myth One: Things Were Fine Until the Council**

Vatican II is consistently bashed by those who are most ignorant of cultural history, and especially those unacquainted with the nature and history of Catholic academia in the 20th century. Such persons cling to the myth that the explosion of Modernist secularism in the Church was a direct result of the Council's proposals. Even chronologically, this myth is incomparably ludicrous. The rapidity of change was far beyond the possibility of the Council to produce. Instead, the explosion of Modernist secularism in the Church was a direct result of an abrupt public secularization of Western culture at the same time as the Council, which had the effect of removing the leash from an already *largely Modernist Catholic academic world*, which had been more or less steadily rotting from within for the previous seventy-five years.

This is why literally thousands of Catholic scholars went from publishing the expected orthodox works to publishing heterodox works all at once, in the first few years

after the Council closed; it is why priests poured out of the seminaries *immediately* espousing ideas that they weren't permitted to repeat in public before; it is why whole religious orders went bad overnight; it is why the majority of theologians, including Paul VI's own theological commission, advocated a change in the Church's teaching on contraception immediately following the close of the Council; and it is why most Western Catholic journals (and not a few major publishing houses) became Modernist rags in a matter of months. All of this was waiting to happen; it was a cultural shift in what was publicly acceptable that finally enabled these largely-hidden things to begin to dominate public discourse. Those who had been waiting for the public mood to favor them showed their true colors as soon as it became fashionable to do so.

A friend recently reminded me of a particularly telling example of the process I have just identified. Those watching the world of Church architecture (which is less easy to prove "wrong" than the written word) were actually able to observe in Church buildings the same dark processes which had been more secretly at work in Catholic universities and theological schools throughout the first half of the twentieth century. To quote Duncan Stroik, professor of Architecture at Notre Dame, "Current church architecture is not merely the child of modern theology, it is also a child of the 'masters' of Modernism: Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright and others. The Church willingly accepted and even adopted the architecture of the secular realm for its sacred buildings" forty or fifty years before the Council convened—well before (dare I say it) the change in the liturgy.

The plain fact of history is that the intellectual classes in the West had already long since gone secular, which means that the intellectual classes in the Western Church, hoping to retain their respectability, had already long since gone Modernist to keep up. Only a thin wall of propriety and sobriety kept this from infecting the total culture in the post-war years of the late 1940's and 1950's (look back to the inter-war period, especially the 1920's, and you'll see it affecting the larger culture very clearly, but it was forced underground again in more sobering times of depression and war). Once the cultural and sexual revolution of the 1960's made it at last broadly popular to express the forbidden views of academe—very popular indeed, especially among those dreary step-children of academe, the mass media—the cat fairly leapt out of the bag.

Our ordinary daily world changed almost overnight. The Catholic intelligentsia were already poised to take the Church right along with the world. Note that all the traditions of the Church, whether human or Divine—including the Tridentine rite itself—had failed to restrain them in the least.

## **Myth Two: The Entire Church Has Been Ruined by Vatican II**

This one is quicker. If you are already sensing the problem with the phrase “by Vatican II” in this heading, you’re probably beginning to realize how bad Kool Aid tastes. It truly is a drink for children, who have little or no discernment. Perhaps you’ll spew it out of your mouth when you also consider that in those regions of the world in which the documents of the Second Vatican Council have been actually taken seriously in their reality rather than as a Modernist media myth, the Church (priests and sisters and laity) is growing stronger and more numerous by leaps and bounds. The best example of this is Africa, but it is also true of significant sectors of Asia and even some areas of Latin America—the regions generally known as the global south. Many areas of Eastern Europe have also largely been spared the Modernist onslaught, with significantly improved results. The debilitating revolution within the Church has taken place primarily in the West, where the Church is simply mirroring the vain and catastrophic collapse of the surrounding culture (except that she is, as always, far better than the surrounding culture—and, in fact, she is slowly righting herself, as the culture is not). Worldwide, the Church is both growing and growing stronger as a whole. But like the Modernists, we Westerners tend to discount the importance of anything outside our enlightened European consciousness.

## **Myth Three: The Council Documents Do Not Need to be Followed Because ...**

You’ve read the subtitle. Now, because why? Because the Council was primarily called for the pastoral purpose of giving guidance on renewal, and such guidance is not delivered in infallible propositions? Or because the Council didn’t intend to define anything new (the Church, by the way, *never* defines anything new)? On this reading, either the Council didn’t intend to teach anything (and what looks like teaching is a slip of the pen) or, when it did teach, it was unprotected by the Holy Spirit, so that it could teach falsehood.

Or is it possible that the Council documents need not be followed because they are “vague”, or because the Council foresaw that many details of the renewal for which it called would have to be worked out by others in various committees and commissions over time? Amazingly, the Council is accused by the Right of vagueness and irresponsible experimentation because it gave guidelines for renewal and called upon all Catholics to bestir themselves to fill in the particulars according to their vocations and offices. (In truth this sounds like CatholicCulture.org offering sound principles for

forming Catholic culture while at the same time understanding that the details will have to be worked out through the application of these principles by countless men and women, in countless varying situations, over time.)

Does anyone seriously believe that a council of some 2,500 bishops could have worked out all the details of the liturgical renewal as a sort of committee of the whole? Could a council of 2,500 bishops, meeting once and for all over a three-year period, have spelled out a detailed response to every step of future ecumenical discussions? Do guidelines for renewal admit of the same kind of meticulously clear and comprehensive formulation as doctrinal definitions? Is there something fundamentally (and suspiciously!) wrong with clearly enunciating goals and guidelines and then telling the Church to get on with the job? Is it now the Church's fault if we do not follow her advice?

Do some actually believe that it is just as easy to state comprehensively what is right, and to articulate a detailed, locked down, step-by-step program for the next hundred years, as it is to condemn a doctrinal or moral error? But in truth I am engaging in a largely rhetorical exercise. To raise any of these questions is to answer them.

### **Strong Evidence of the Holy Spirit**

If you read the documents of Vatican II without Kool Aid swishing around your tongue, you'll begin to taste and see the goodness of the Lord. In particular, you'll see in a moment that what has happened in the Church in the West is something very unlike what the Council called for. But it is even more striking than that. In fact, what happened in the West is that the vast majority of bishops *immediately abandoned the principles of the Council* under the onslaught of a simultaneous cultural shift, particularly the intense public shift in the stance of Catholic academia (which was already largely rotten) and the mass media. Thus these bishops (and their successors, who were already being trained to do so) ended up accommodating and even facilitating a whole series of changes, doctrines, and spiritual failures which at every stage contradicted not only the guidelines issued by the Council in its pastoral mission but most of the positive teachings of the Council on such things as the nature and authority of the Church, the roles of priests and laity, the purpose and power of the liturgy, the impetus and value of missionary work—the list goes on.

Note carefully what this means. I am saying that, as far at least as Westerners go, the selfsame body of men who approved a clear set of ideas and recommendations in the Council documents actually immediately went off and did something else entirely. Under what could only be regarded by any of the Church's martyrs as the slightest of cultural pressures, a large body of bishops and leaders of religious orders abandoned both the

letter and the vision of the Council in favor of accommodation to secularism, Modernism, banality and trivia.

“Aha!” you say? “We see what sort of men made the Council, and can now explain why it was so inevitably bad!” Sorry, no, this is the ultimate Kool Aid. Indeed, we do see what sort of men made the Council. But this forces us to an exactly opposite conclusion. For in seeing their weakness and comparing it with the Council documents themselves, we are struck immediately, as in a vision, by how decisively the Holy Spirit worked at Vatican II. Given the men who made the Council’s decisions, it is *impossible to explain* the beauty, strength and even clarity of the Council’s documents in any other way. By the way, this can be said with considerable justice of every ecumenical council in the Church’s history.

This is why, when you read the remarks of Pope John Paul II or Benedict XVI on Vatican II over the past thirty-plus years, you’ll hear them again and again stating that the Council must be accepted, but the reform must be reformed. This is because the Holy Spirit was behind the work of the ecumenical council that met at the Vatican from 1962 to 1965, but, once untethered from the Spirit’s control, the mere men who had once been Council Fathers chose, again and again, to run and hide from the Holy Spirit’s work.

Now, in case the dubious reader has not gotten my point, let me say it very plainly. Indeed, I pray God that I may never need to say it again. We must stop drawing our understanding of Vatican II from the Modernist media blitz. If you are blaming the Council documents in any way for the temporary triumph of Modernism in the West, you are still drinking the Kool Aid. You are also part of the problem, not part of the solution. In fact, you are resisting the Holy Spirit’s course for the authentic renewal of the Church.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=428>

# The Assent Owed to Vatican II

December 02, 2011

What is finally emerging as the sticking point between the Vatican and the Society of Saint Pius X is the question of the assent owed to the Second Vatican Council. This is now the subject of an [important essay](#) in *L'Osservatore Romano* by one of the key negotiators for the Vatican, the vicar general of Opus Dei, Msgr. Fernando Ocariz. Note that we also have a [news story](#) which includes substantial quotations.

I hate to say I told you so, but Msgr. Ocariz says exactly the same thing I have been saying for years here on CatholicCulture.org. But of course this is no surprise because it is something that all faithful theologians have known from the first. Since it was an ecumenical council, meeting and promulgating its acts to the whole Church under the authority of the Pope, the Second Vatican Council's doctrinal sentences demand assent in the following ways:

1. Whenever the Council teaches something about faith and morals, what it teaches is certainly true, either through the specific note of infallibility or from the religious submission of mind and will owed to the ordinary magisterium.
2. If such a teaching on faith or morals appears to anyone to conflict with earlier teachings, the problem is not with the truth of the Council's statement but with our understanding of the Church's full teaching, of which the Council's statement is inescapably a part.
3. Proper method demands that an understanding of the matter in question be found that accepts the truth of all relevant statements. Later statements can be illuminated by earlier ones and earlier statements can be illuminated by later ones, until a more complete and precise understanding is formed.
4. Where the Council was not teaching on matters of faith and morals, such as where it was describing contemporary conditions or offering recommendations for renewal, its statements are to be received with respect and gratitude but are not necessarily flawless in either their factual accuracy or their prudential judgment.
5. It follows that any arguments which undermine this understanding, whether

based upon the pastoral interests of the Council or any other factor, are specious.

The Council itself explained this in a doctrinal comment added to the *Acta* in both March and November of 1964, which I took note of in the [introduction to my commentary](#) on *Lumen Gentium (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)* in my series on Vatican II (now available as an [ebook](#)). In addition, I have talked about this until my face has turned the proverbial blue—with respect to the Council itself, the Magisterium in general, and proper theological method. See, for example:

- [A funny thing about Vatican II...](#) (the introduction to my series on the documents)
- [Vatican II on the Church: Introduction](#) (cited also in the preceding paragraph)
- [Doctrinal Development on Religious Liberty](#) (an essay on the toughest theological question arising from these controversies)
- [Drinking the Kool Aid on Vatican II](#) (demonstrating how the Modernists have led many Traditionalists astray on this question)
- [Pope Paul VI on Vatican II](#) (refuting the claim that Paul himself said the Council did not need to be followed)
- [Conflicting Teachings of the Magisterium?](#) (on how we are to handle *apparent* conflicts)
- [On Waffling, Tradition, and the Magisterium](#) (further comments on the same theme)
- [Benedict's Hermeneutic of Continuity](#) (showing that this is the whole approach of Benedict's pontificate, and how it is to be understood)

Now I grant that Msgr. Ocariz is not the only person involved in the discussions, but it obviously no coincidence that his article was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* immediately following the [SSPX's request for clarifications](#) to the Doctrinal Preamble (the basis for negotiations) on this precise point.

In any case, Msgr. Ocariz has stated with admirable clarity exactly what the Church herself said at the time of the Council, exactly what the Church has understood to be the case since the Council, and in fact exactly what the Church has always believed about what constitutes a magisterial teaching and how magisterial teachings are to be received.

I am among those who devoutly hope that the SSPX can be reconciled on this point and can therefore be brought back into full communion with the Church. But make no mistake about it: This is the key question and what Msgr. Ocariz outlines is the correct answer. This is so true that how each of us answers this question of the assent due to Vatican II is one of those things—whether we consider ourselves Modernists or Traditionalists or something in between, and whether we feel ourselves beset by Church authority or feel we are allowed to go on as if nothing is wrong—it is one of those things that really does determine whether we are Catholic in name only or are (as I would hope) actually Catholic in fact.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=899>

# Pope Paul VI on Vatican II

November 04, 2011

From time to time I still see comments to the effect that the authority of the Second Vatican Council is problematic because Pope Paul VI said it did not promulgate any dogmatic definitions. This citation is thought to settle the matter. But it does not settle things in the way those who cite it usually intend. Let me explain.

The quotation generally used is from a general audience given by Paul VI on January 12, 1966. At that time, Paul spoke as follows:

There are those who ask what authority, what theological qualification the Council intended to give to its teachings, knowing that it avoided issuing solemn dogmatic definitions engaging the infallibility of the ecclesiastical Magisterium. The answer is known by whoever remembers the conciliar declaration of March 6, 1964, repeated on November 16, 1964: given the Council's pastoral character, it avoided pronouncing, in an extraordinary manner, dogmas endowed with the note of infallibility.

The first thing to note about this statement is that it was not itself an exercise of the Magisterium. It was said in a general audience, which can by no means be construed as having the intention of teaching by virtue of the Pope's apostolic authority to the whole Church on a matter of faith and morals. A precise theological handling of this quotation, therefore, demands that we not accord it any decisive weight. It would not, for example, in any way supersede a clear statement by an ecumenical council to the contrary. Nonetheless, I will parse it below as if it is a magisterial statement, so that we can understand precisely what it would require of us if it were.

The second thing to note is that by the very nature of things both an ecumenical council (that is, a council whose decrees are promulgated by the pope) and the pope alone are protected from error whenever they clearly intend to (1) teach (2) by virtue of their apostolic authority (3) to the whole church (4) on a matter of faith or morals.

This freedom from error may be described in two ways. When the teaching is formally and precisely identified as an exercise of the magisterium to settle some matter, it is considered an act of the extraordinary magisterium and it clearly meets the definition for infallibility given at Vatican I. When the teaching is given in a less formal

and more generally instructive way, it is considered an act of the ordinary magisterium, and its freedom from error is guaranteed by the fact that every Catholic is bound to accept such teachings, and must do so to remain fully Catholic. Indeed, the entire reason for such protection by the Holy Spirit is that the Magisterium cannot be permitted to bind the whole Church to error, which would render void Christ's promise to be with the Church.

The third thing to note is that the citation from Paul VI, even if parsed strictly as magisterial statements must always be, does not say what many people think it says. What it says is not that there is a possibility of error in the Council's decrees (in teaching on faith and morals) but that the Council, because of the particular purpose it had in view, did not propound any dogmas through the extraordinary exercise of its magisterium. To the best of my knowledge, no theologian or commentator has ever claimed that it did.

In other places, the Pope stressed on more than one occasion that the Council must not be understood to have taught anything contrary to what the Church had taught in the past, and that everything it taught must be interpreted in a manner consistent with past teaching properly understood. Here again, some have argued that this means we are free to reject anything in Vatican II that appears to us to be somehow "different". But all this means is the same thing that is true of any magisterial exercise, that the Magisterium must always be understood in such a way that both the older and the newer formulations are seen to be true. This is exactly what Pope Benedict XVI has been stressing with his hermeneutic of continuity, as opposed to a hermeneutic of rupture.

Now, to finally put our leading quotation from the general audience of January 12, 1966 in perspective, we need first to note the very next sentence: "But it [the Council] has invested its teachings with the authority of the supreme ordinary magisterium, which ordinary magisterium is so obviously authentic that it must be accepted with docility and sincerity by all the faithful, according to the mind of the Council as expressed in the nature and aims of the individual documents." Taken as a whole, Paul's comments here summarize the repeated Conciliar declaration which the Pope alluded to in our leading quotation (and which I covered in my 2010 series on the documents of Vatican II, specifically in my [Introduction](#) to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church).

Second, we need to consider all of the other statements Pope Paul VI made on this same topic. Two of these are actually magisterial, included in the acts of the Council itself. Each document ends with this statement:

Each and every one of the things set forth in this *[here the type of document is*

*named]* has won the consent of the fathers. We too, by the Apostolic Authority conferred on us by Christ, join with the venerable Fathers in approving, decreeing, and establishing these things in the Holy Spirit, and we direct that what has thus been enacted in Synod be published to God's glory...I, Paul, Bishop of the Catholic Church.

Moreover, the entire body of the Council's work was promulgated by Paul VI as follows on December 8, 1965:

We decide moreover that all that has been established synodally is to be religiously observed by all the faithful, for the glory of God and the dignity of the Church... we have approved and established these things, decreeing that the present letters are and remain stable and valid, and are to have legal effectiveness, so that they be disseminated and obtain full and complete effect...

Taken together, these two statements are what make the Second Vatican Council *ecumenical*, that is, approved and promulgated by the successor of Peter, and therefore a universal magisterial exercise of the highest importance.

Next we turn to other non-magisterial statements. I have not been able to find the full text in English of the general audience which we have been discussing, but it is available on the Vatican website in [Italian](#). In it, Pope Paul also said the following (my translation may be imperfect):

The heritage of the Council is constituted by the documents which were promulgated at various conclusive moments in the discussions and deliberations; these documents are of a diverse nature; some are Constitutions (four), some Decrees (nine), and some Declarations (three); but all together they form a body of doctrine and of law which should give to the Church that renewal for which the Council was put in motion. To grasp, to study, to apply these documents is the duty and the happy task of the post-conciliar period.

Finally, about ten years later, in an [allocution \(also in Italian\)](#) to the secret consistory of cardinals on May 24, 1976, Pope Paul VI specifically addressed the distortions and disobedience of Archbishop Lefebvre and his followers with respect to the Second Vatican Council. This too is non-magisterial, but it is proper to round out the thought he expressed non-magisterially in the general audience so commonly cited:

There are those who, under the pretext of a greater fidelity to the Church and the Magisterium, systematically refuse the teaching of the Council itself, its application and the reforms that stem from it, its gradual application by the Apostolic See and the Episcopal Conferences, under Our authority, willed by Christ.

He even exclaimed in utter frustration:

It is even affirmed that the Second Vatican Council is not binding; that the faith would be in danger also because of the post-conciliar reforms and guidelines, which there is a duty to disobey to preserve certain traditions. What traditions? Does it belong to this group, and not the Pope, not the Episcopal College, not an Ecumenical Council, to establish which of the countless traditions must be regarded as the norm of faith!

The purpose of this essay has been to thoroughly examine the thought of Paul VI on this subject. But when we add that most of the “controversial” statements in Vatican II had already been taught by Pope Pius XII, and that all of them have since been repeatedly reaffirmed by both the magisterium and the programs of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, and that all popes since the conciliar documents were promulgated have consistently regarded acceptance of the authority of Vatican II as a pre-requisite to full communion with the Church—it becomes even more clear that it is time to lay another old canard to rest.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=886>

# SOCIAL TEACHING

# Doctrine and Policy: The Authentic Catholic Mind

August 11, 2011

I never cease to be amazed by two kinds of reactions to the positions we take on CatholicCulture.org. On the one hand, some people react to our explanation or defense of Catholic doctrine as if we are articulating just another personal opinion. On the other hand, some react to our suggestions for political, social or economic development as if they are dogmatic errors which must be rejected at all costs. Truth to tell, both reactions very often come from the same people.

These reactions indicate a deep misunderstanding of what it means to be Catholic coupled with a tendency to take one's cues from prevailing cultural ideas rather than from the Church herself. For the Church teaches infallibly in matters of faith and morals (commonly called Catholic doctrine). But in matters of political, social or economic development, she can teach authoritatively only at the level of guiding principles, and not at the level of practical proposals, mechanisms and policies. Therefore, the only reasonable approach for a Catholic is to assent to Catholic doctrine without argument while accepting the legitimacy of disagreement over specific proposals for political, social and economic development.

The former is guaranteed by God Himself; the latter must be evaluated prudentially on two counts: First, the degree to which a proposal accords with the principles of Catholic social teaching; second, the degree to which it can actually be expected to accomplish its goals. But when people assert that doctrine is a matter of opinion while specific social strategies can be dogmatically approved or rejected, then we are no longer dealing with a Catholic mind. Only the person whose mind and attachments are primarily formed by the world will relativize doctrine and absolutize politics.

A similar error can occur in our evaluation of the Church herself, for the Church has both human and Divine elements, both fallible and infallible. For example, if a Catholic is willing to cooperate with grace, Catholic doctrine and the sacraments infallibly engender holiness, but the Church's administrative programs bear fruit only according to their prudential matching of the right action to the right situation, and the behavior of individual Churchmen bears fruit according to its conformity with Christ. For this reason,

when we dislike or react negatively to particular programs and policies or to things that particular Churchmen have done, we react with a Catholic mindset only if we distinguish such things from the essential holiness of the Church herself.

The tendency to dismiss the Church because, in this or that era, the actions of some Church leaders were either immoral or ill-suited to the needs of the time, is to incorrectly characterize the Church by her human element. Not only is this a category mistake, but it typically means we recognize and react against the sins in one culture primarily because they are not serious temptations in our own, yet we ignore those sins which are symptomatic of the culture in which, sadly, we too often live and move and have our being. This tendency to judge the Church by her human and fallible elements, which are very frequently alleged as reasons for rejecting her infallible teachings, is simply another example of a mind formed not by Christ but by the world.

Returning for a moment to the question of political, social and economic suggestions, we do well to advance vigorously whatever approach we believe offers the best combination of Catholic social principles and practical effectiveness. Sometimes passions will run high, which ought to do nobody any harm, as long as we do not absolutize our positions, as if no true Catholic could possibly disagree. The right balance is sometimes difficult to strike, particularly in a discussion between those who believe (as I do) that the modern secular State is seriously corrosive of the social order; and those who believe that the modern secular State is the only possible defender of the common good against those who are naturally rapacious (often referred to as *businessmen*). I need not repeat the arguments here. It is perfectly acceptable that I am passionately committed to my proposals—as long as I don't claim that God is sure I'm right.

But God is sure that the Church is right when it comes to faith and morals, including the proper understanding of the natural law. This is because God has guaranteed the Church's conformity with His own mind through her Magisterium. As men and women, we can easily lose sight of this, because we tend to be culture bound. But as Catholics we must rise above culture and take God's view of things. The first step is to recognize that the Church's doctrine is certain, but our political, social and economic prescriptions are provisional. The authentic Catholic mind always knows what is up for grabs, and what is not.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=843>

# Shooting the Messenger: What the Church teaches about her own authority

October 26, 2011

Phil Lawler and I have had some very negative responses to our commentaries on Monday's recommendation by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to establish a new stratum of world government to regulate certain aspects of the global economy (see PL, [Spare us from Vatican economic analysts](#) and JM, [The PCJP's Vision of Polity: The Ideal vs. the Real](#)).

Perhaps it was something in our tone which gave offense, but some people objected to the strict distinction we drew between the authority of the Magisterium of the Church on the one hand, and the utter lack of authority in any concrete social, political or economic solutions any Churchmen, including those at the Vatican, might propose on the other. Some people simply did not like this stark dichotomy.

For those in that group, I would counsel you not to shoot the messenger. We were not stating our preferences on this, or being cafeteria Catholics, or selective dissenters. We were upholding the Church's own magisterial teaching about the nature of her authority, and using that teaching as a basis for criticism of what appeared to us to be a potentially-damaging foray into technical economic and political solutions on the part of one of the Church's agencies.

## **The Church's Position and Some Related Dangers**

The Church has magisterially stated, again and again throughout history, that she does not and cannot offer particular, concrete solutions to political, social or economic problems. Instead, she teaches the truth about man, basic principles drawn from Revelation and the Natural Law which should guide the laity in addressing such problems themselves. To prescribe specific solutions is beyond the Church's competence. Typically when individual churchmen, groups of bishops, Vatican offices, or even popes themselves have deviated from their charism and competence in this matter, it has only served to alienate and confuse the faithful.

This is because in offering specific solutions, those who represent the Church are as

subject to human error, and at least potentially as culture bound, as anyone else. Their advice may be impractical, poorly conceived, or worse; they may advocate a particular solution because it is familiar and comfortable, without seeing new things that must be addressed; they may fail to discern significant new conditions, or they may fail to acknowledge existing conditions which it is unfashionable to admit. In stating what appears to them obvious, they may really be drawing what seems obvious from their own ignorance or their own prejudices. Their advice will almost always appear partisan to those who disagree with it, and this invariably reduces the ability of the Church to minister effectively to all. Finally, to expend ecclesiastical authority on matters in which the Church has no special competence inevitably serves to undermine the trust of the faithful in the Church's teachings on faith and morals, where she is competent to the point of infallibility.

I would wager that the Church has formally clarified the limits of her teaching authority hundreds of times in history, including very often in modern times. This has been especially true when formulating her social teaching, because in this area the Church's competence must be clarified in order to avoid precisely the kinds of misunderstandings which I have enumerated. To prove this claim, let us look at what three recent popes have stipulated in their respective social encyclicals:

**Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967:**

...the Church, without attempting to interfere in any way in the politics of States, "seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served". (#13)

If the role of the Hierarchy is to teach and to interpret authentically the norms of morality to be followed in this matter, it belongs to the laymen, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live. (#81)

**Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987:**

The Church does not have technical solutions to offer for the problem of underdevelopment as such, as Pope Paul VI already affirmed in his Encyclical. For the Church does not propose economic and political systems or programs, nor does she show preference for one or the other, provided that human dignity is properly

respected and promoted, and provided she herself is allowed the room she needs to exercise her ministry in the world. (#41)

It is worth pointing out that this encyclical is entitled *On the Social Teaching of the Church*, and that this passage is footnoted precisely to the two paragraphs from Paul VI quoted above, in case there is any doubt over what those passages mean.

**Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009:**

The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim “to interfere in any way in the politics of States.” She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation. (#9)

Here Pope Benedict deliberately refers to the statements of both Paul VI and John Paul II. To conclude, then, it is the Church’s mission to build the Kingdom of God among men, forming them in faith, hope and love, and teaching them the principles of right understanding and right conduct that are found in the Gospel and the Natural Law. Thus formed and vivified, the laity, who are to live in the world, assume the office of implementing and transforming all human activities, goals, policies and structures, using their energy and expertise to address the manifold problems of ordinary life in the light of Christ.

### **Back to Our Commentaries**

Now it is certainly possible for a reader to believe we were wrong to suggest that the recent advice of the PCJP was bad advice. That is a matter for legitimate discussion and debate among those who are well versed in the problems cited. It is also possible to recognize that some priests, bishops, and Vatican agencies, especially those which enlist the services of many lay experts, may have useful concrete proposals to offer in political, social or economic affairs. Our point here is simply that such discourse under the auspices of “the Church” always carries with it, at least potentially, the problems I itemized earlier.

But it is not possible, as a believing Catholic, to disagree with the one pivotal point of our commentaries, namely, that such concrete proposals, no matter what their source within the Church, are necessarily lacking in authority. To utilize them effectively, you must first separate out any illusion of intrinsic spiritual weight, and then evaluate them absolutely on their human merits.

Moreover, you must retain the agility of mind to distinguish sharply between such statements and other kinds of statements, from similar sources, which embody the Church's absolute and unconditional authority over faith and morals. More still, you must promise yourself that your annoyance at deficiencies in the first realm will never tempt you to suppose there are equal deficiencies in the second. And even more than all this, you must avoid the temptation of thinking that because you accept the proposals in the first realm while rejecting the teachings in the second, you are therefore as good a Catholic as those who reject the proposals in the first realm while accepting the teachings in the second.

Now I ask you: Why is it not possible to disagree about this? Because that's what the Church, through her Magisterium, teaches. The Church herself unequivocally asserts, with her full competence to discern the truth, that she has no authority, no competence, to speak in these matters: "The Church does not have technical solutions to offer."

So please do not shoot the messenger: We do not make this stuff up.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=511>

# Splitting social and life issues? Can't do it.

September 18, 2009

Have you noticed that those who are pro-abortion always attempt to seize the moral high ground when it comes to social issues? They may favor widespread contraception, abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and euthanasia, but that doesn't prevent them from presenting themselves as more compassionate than others, because they really care about the poor and about economic disparity in general. The proof is that they favor Federal programs that attempt to implement distributive justice by redistributing wealth.

Now I have no quarrel with distributive justice. I'm a Catholic, not a libertarian. Truly, there is a large, long-standing and debilitating quarrel between left and right about the role of distributive justice, but I want to reserve a Catholic analysis of that issue for another time. Today I'm interested in that other false dichotomy between left and right, the one that says you can support the culture of death while still being right on social issues. This dichotomy presents life issues and social issues as disconnected.

Catholics of dubious commitment make a living off of this dichotomy, claiming the moral high ground by asserting their exemplary support of Catholic social teaching. But in his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict very deliberately turns the tables. He states point blank that this dichotomy is false. He teaches that if you do not get the life issues right, it is *impossible* to get the social issues right.

## The Roots of the Socio-Economic Order

*Caritas in Veritate* was written partly to commemorate Pope Paul VI's social encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, which marked a critical development in Catholic social teaching through its articulation of the requirements for authentic human development. Never mind for the moment that we Americans always read social encyclicals for the purpose of figuring out which "side" the pope is on (again, left or right); that's a sure recipe for blindness which I'll take up in that future examination of distributive justice. Though Benedict does address that issue in his encyclical, he first does something even more important. In reviewing the entire body of Paul VI's social teaching, Benedict includes *Humanae Vitae*.

This is a decisive inclusion toward which the Church has been building steadily for the last forty years. Benedict notes immediately that in *Humanae Vitae* Paul VI identified the foundation of society as *a married couple open to life*. This is not a matter of private morality, he says; rather, it creates an unbreakable link between life ethics and social ethics. The link is so important that *Humanae Vitae* ushered in a new area of magisterial teaching, leading, for example, to John Paul II's landmark document *Evangelium Vitae*: the Gospel of Life.

Here's how Benedict describes the link:

Openness to life is at the center of true development. When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away. The acceptance of life strengthens moral fiber and makes people capable of mutual help. By cultivating openness to life, wealthy peoples can better understand the needs of poor ones, they can avoid employing huge economic and intellectual resources to satisfy the selfish desires of their own citizens, and instead, they can promote virtuous action within the perspective of production that is morally sound and marked by solidarity, respecting the fundamental right to life of every people and every individual. (28)

In the face of this fundamental reality about openness to life, Benedict finds it pathetic that some governments enforce contraception, sterilization and abortion, and that other governments and NGOs encourage these practices and even attempt to export them to other parts of the world as if they represent some sort of social progress. They represent exactly the opposite.

### **Population Growth and Development**

The encyclical devotes considerable space to stressing that "to consider population increase as the primary cause of underdevelopment is mistaken, even from an economic point of view" (44). As everyone ought to know by now, declining birth rates in most societies constitute a huge problem, especially obvious in Europe. The reasons are fairly simple: Declining birth rates strain social welfare systems, increase their cost to those who are working, reduce the availability of savings which should be a resource for investment, reduce the availability of qualified laborers, and narrow the brain pool. And these are just the economic consequences.

Moreover, although Benedict himself does not specifically make this point, his argument presupposes a critical economic reality, demonstrated once again by the current recession: Significant economic development—that is, development with substance and staying power—is not possible without a vigorous new generation. By the nature of things, investment is always for the future, and the future can only bear a return insofar as there are large numbers of active persons in the next generation to invest in. Thus the graying of any society is a prelude to its inevitable financial collapse. In Benedict’s own words, “responsible procreation...has a positive contribution to make to integral human development” and, in fact, “openness to life represents a rich social and economic resource” (44).

Therefore, societies and cultures which reduce sex to recreation and regard procreation as a form of risk are gripped by a materialism which limits freedom, undermines the family and, in every conceivable respect, mortgages the future. This argument is both economic and more than economic. Benedict is not afraid to state clearly that “smaller and at times miniscule families run the risk of impoverishing social relations, and failing to ensure effective forms of solidarity” (44), the lack of which significantly impedes integral human development, including economic development. The feminization of poverty is another excellent example of the “anti-development” that is caused by the breakdown of the marriage bond and the family, a breakdown rooted largely in a false attitude toward sex and procreation. This has had a devastating impact on women, giving poverty a distinctly feminine face.

All of these situations, writes Benedict, “are symptomatic of scant confidence in the future and moral weariness” (44). Authentic development, including any sort of consistent economic development, simply cannot occur in this corrosive atmosphere. The best that a few people can hope for is a temporary superdevelopment in which they take advantage of their largely accidental personal wealth to grasp at an ever-growing array of material things and material comforts. Too often, the Pope points out, “superdevelopment” signifies “moral underdevelopment” (29), which causes massive damage throughout the social order. Such moral underdevelopment eventually reduces other persons to instruments without regard for their essential finality, their necessary openness to the absolute, and their own need for integral development.

### **Can’t Do It**

Quoting John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae*, Benedict drives his point home: “A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by

allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized” (15). In other words, the clear message of *Caritas in Veritate* is that no one can claim to be right on the social issues when he is wrong on the life issues. When we are wrong on the life issues we make social development impossible from its very foundation. This does not mean, of course, that every pro-lifer fully embraces Catholic social teaching as it relates to solidarity and economic policy. But it does mean that embracing the culture of life is the *sine qua non* of human development.

So, in a nutshell, what is Benedict’s message to all those—including many secularized Catholics—who claim we ought to support politicians who embrace the culture of death because they advocate a superior socio-economic policy? Sorry, says *Charity in Truth*, that pony won’t run. Social development is impossible when its very foundation is rotten. It’ll never happen. Can’t do it.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=344>

# Subsidiarity within the Church?

January 27, 2010

Since I've been writing more frequently about the principle of subsidiarity over the past year, I've received several dismissive comments that run something like this: "Perhaps it would be possible to take subsidiarity seriously if the Church would apply it to herself." In the background, one can almost hear the collective intake of breath as a crowd prepares to cheer the courage of a commentator who tells it like it is!

But unfortunately such a comment doesn't tell it like it is at all. The principle of subsidiarity applies to the ordering of temporal things, not spiritual things; and it applies especially to societies in which participation is involuntary, not to organizations which one can enter or leave at will. The main lines of Catholic vision (the truths of the Faith), Catholic organization (the hierarchy of orders), Catholic goals (union with God) and Catholic means (sacramental life) have been established by God Himself. Only a complete idiot would argue that what has been revealed by God would really be better decided by committee. And, of course, if anyone doesn't happen to like what God has revealed, or doesn't believe He has revealed it, that person is free to leave the Church and join another religious movement, start his own, or leave religion alone altogether.

This is not to say that Catholics should not be free to make important decisions about their own spiritual lives, or to establish organizations to give adequate scope and support to their own particular noble aspirations, within the limits set by what has been revealed. Indeed, it is a mark of spiritual maturity for the laity to participate in the life of the Church in this way, as well as to extend the influence of Christ in the world. Wherever pastors unnecessarily oppose such legitimate freedom, instead of welcoming and guiding it according to the Church's mind, an unfortunate clericalism creeps in which weakens both the Church and her mission. But unlike the temporal order, in which it is up to human persons to decide the purposes and methods of social organization within the very broad constraints of the natural law, the optimum program for the spiritual order is set down clearly by God Himself.

Nor is this to deny that any good organization will seek to get the most out of its members by affording them the widest possible latitude to determine their own course within the framework of the organization's purposes. A parent will encourage a child to assume ever-greater responsibility within the moral and social constraints of family life,

a political party will wisely have reference to the opinions and goals of its members, and every good pastor will rely heavily on lay volunteers in shaping his parish's social life and charitable works. But the need to operate in this way is far stronger in societies from which people cannot freely withdraw. If the person who runs your club doesn't foster your participation in devising its plans, you can quit or even start a rival organization. If your government doesn't foster your participation, you can't.

Within the Church there are two sides of this problem of the participation of the faithful. On the one hand, if your church doesn't foster your participation within the limits of its structure, values and mission, your church is being rather poorly managed. But on the other hand it is even worse if your church fosters your participation in the wrong things, such as the fruitless task of second-guessing what God has established as its structure, values and mission. For in that case, your church is self-destructing.

There is a secular mindset too often found among nominal Catholics, perhaps especially Catholics who have been "educated" in those institutions which dissent from what God has revealed. It is a mindset which routinely applies a horizontal attitude to a vertical problem, taking the notion that "we'll figure it out as we go along" from the social order and applying it to the spiritual order. This mindset completely forgets that we can know very little about God, even less of our spiritual nature, and absolutely nothing of our eternal destiny, unless God reveals these things to us.

On our own we have little more than a relatively vague understanding of right and wrong, a conviction that we are liable to judgment, and an intuition that God has planted this profound sense of reality in what we call the faculty of conscience. But beyond this, our only course is to follow the next logical assumption—that a God who cares enough about us to build these ideas into our conscience must also care enough to reveal Himself to us. Accordingly, we ought to make a point of identifying and following this Revelation. Once we have found it, we would be very stupid to throw it away again by rewriting it for our own purposes, or submitting it to a vote.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=583>

# SCRIPTURE

# The Catholic Approach to Scripture

March 14, 2011

One of our users, who is in the process of converting from a Protestant background, asked me to comment on some things she was taught about Scripture in her RCIA class. In particular, she was concerned about statements that some parts of Scripture she had taken literally in the past were not necessarily to be taken literally, such as the Book of Genesis (Creation and the Flood), the Book of Jonah, and the Book of Job. She also encountered warnings against “overzealous Fundamentalists” in an otherwise helpful book she had been reading to improve her understanding of Catholic doctrine.

This opened up a vast and complex topic, and there was no possibility of doing justice to it in an email message (or, indeed, in a single article). But I wanted to provide what I hoped would be a helpful overview, and by the time I had finished, it had grown a bit, and I thought perhaps it would be helpful to others. It also gives an indication of some of the work we do to help people behind the scenes.

## The Fundamentalist and Catholic Views of Scripture

The Catholic approach to Scripture is quite different from that of most serious Protestants, especially Fundamentalists. To begin with, Protestants have neither Tradition nor Authority to enlighten their interpretations of Scripture. Since Scripture and Tradition are two forms of Revelation from the same God, and since the Petrine authority in the Church is established and protected by Christ, the Magisterium combines with Scripture and Tradition to give a complete and certain view of the truth. As the teachings of all three come from the same Holy Spirit, a right understanding of the Faith is possible only when all three are taken properly into account.

In addition, since Protestants believe that everything required for salvation is in Scripture, and only Scripture provides what is required (*sola Scriptura*), they have rather a vested interest in insisting (contrary to their own historical experience) that Scripture must be as plain as day. Fundamentalists in particular view Scripture as something clear and obvious, much like a 20th century newspaper account—something to be received more or less as a series of plain facts that anybody can understand.

But this is nothing like the original Christian understanding of Scripture, as held to this day by the Catholic Church. First, the Catholic understands that God, in attempting

to communicate his infinite mysteries to finite human persons, had little choice but to introduce a significant element of difficulty into His inspired word. Many of the Fathers argued also that this difficulty serves to protect us from pride in the interpretation of Scripture, lest we think we can easily and perfectly expound all the mysteries of God.

Although the Catholic knows that he can read Scripture for personal encouragement and inspiration, he also knows that he must be humble, studious and cautious about asserting the ultimate meaning of the texts. This process of public interpretation is ultimately governed by Church authority, which alone can determine not only what each book teaches, but even which books are inspired in the first place.

### **Genres or Literary Forms**

Second, the Catholic understands that a wide variety of literary forms are used in Scripture. Some are forms with which we are still reasonably familiar, such as poetry (*e.g.*, the Psalms) and historical narrative. Another form (used in Esther and Ruth) is less familiar, appearing to be historical fiction, perhaps closest to the historical novel today. Thus we learn much about the period and some of its key themes and perceptions, but we do not insist that each element of the tale be strictly based on historical fact. Insofar as we are culturally familiar with a literary form we typically have less trouble arriving at plausible interpretations—but in unfamiliar territory, it is easier to make mistakes.

We also encounter allegory and, of course, parables in Scripture. Writings of this type have symbolic, spiritual or moral meanings, rather than literal and historical ones. They are less familiar to us but, with the parables at least, Our Lord sometimes provided the interpretation along with the story. We can easily see that when He told stories like that of the King who sent his stewards to collect the rent for his vineyard, He did not expect this to be taken as a description of a particular historical circumstance in a particular vineyard, or even to apply to real vineyards at all. But in another culture, less comfortable with the parable, it might have been taken that way.

Now the Bible also contains forms of literature with which we are not at all familiar today, but which were quite common in various parts of the ancient world. For example, there is the apocalyptic form, as in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, in which truths beyond human reason are conveyed in astonishing visions and devastating images. The Wisdom literature is also quite different from what we are used to today, and may employ a variety of creative techniques to inculcate a deeper outlook on life. (Even the epistolary form is rapidly fading from modern consciousness!)

This means we must be cautious in determining which books or parts of books are to be taken as literal doctrinal teaching or as factual historical accounts in the modern

sense. We must study carefully the nature of each book and how it has been received and used in the Church's tradition. And ultimately one must defer to the judgment of the Magisterium.

The Creation story in Genesis is a good example. There would appear to be no question that the sacred author wants to teach us that the one and only God is the Creator of all things, that man is at the apex of material creation, that man was formed in God's image and likeness in a way that other created things were not, that our close friendship with God at the beginning has been ruptured by sin, and so on. The formal genre of Genesis seems to be narrative as well. But some of it narrates events that nobody could have witnessed. Is it to be taken literally as a story?

It seems certain simply from reading the text that it is not to be taken literally. After all, there is more than one account of creation in Genesis, and in terms of "factual" content, they are not the same. Moreover, certain features are clearly symbolic, such as the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for it ought to be self-evident that the knowledge of good and evil is not a material fruit that grows on a tree. Because of our inexperience with this form of ancient literature, it is difficult for us to separate the literal from the figurative.

### **Scripture Not Doubtful**

But does this mean that everything in Scripture is up for grabs? No.

First, the guarantee of the truth of Scripture applies (obviously) to what the Holy Spirit, through the sacred authors, intends to teach. To take a perfectly parallel case, if Christ teaches through a parable, his reliability is not undermined because the details of the parable never happened. The parable is merely a tool used to convey a particular truth. So too with the Holy Spirit and all of Scripture. Properly understood, what the Holy Spirit intends to teach is certainly and completely true.

Second, some books are historical, and have been affirmed by the Church as such. The Gospels are the preeminent instance of this, but some of the Old Testament books are clearly historical as well, at least in their main outlines, even if everything might not be word for word. Again, the Tradition and the authority of the Church are critical in making these determinations, along with a study of the text.

Third, we must remember that for every Fundamentalist who has oversimplified the supernatural elements in Scripture, there has been a modern commentator, influenced by secularism and modernism, who has been eager to reduce or eliminate the apparent supernatural character of the text, throwing everything into doubt. These tendencies need correction too. Again, the Magisterium of the Church is the key to getting things right.

Finally, some books are hotly debated in terms of their historicity. How far does historicity extend? How much is it filled in with stories that make a point? Sometimes the Church herself can be certain of the point of a book without being able to affirm its strict historicity. It is possible, for example, that Jonah really was swallowed by a great fish. The story is not beyond God's power. But it is also possible that this was a tale designed to teach something about God's persistence with us, and how we are to respond to God's call. In any case, by Christ's time, it was part of the consciousness of the Jewish people, and Our Lord could make reference to it, either way, without fear that they would miss the point.

### **Teaching, Learning, and Walking the Catholic Line**

Before we close, it is important to recognize two things about RCIA programs and books on the Faith that we might read when we are still in the early stages of learning. First, any given author or RCIA teacher can make a mistake. We're all learning as we go, and that extends throughout our entire lives. Second, any given teacher or program could even have an unfortunate bias, sometimes to the point of heresy. In the period of upheaval in the Church following the 1960's, many RCIA programs picked up a secular modernist slant, reflecting a cultural crisis of Faith which still afflicts a significant portion of our "Catholic intelligentsia".

Things appear to be getting better now, and many programs have improved significantly. Horror stories are thinner on the ground each year. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has played a large role in this since its initial publication in 1994. Most teachers are happy to follow the Catechism, and for many questions you can check the Catechism fairly easily. If what you hear is inconsistent with what the Catechism says, then very likely the presenter is confused. He or she may really need to be "theologically updated", as the Modernists used to say when they encountered people who took Church doctrine too seriously (as if that were possible when teaching the Faith).

In the end, there is a line between Fundamentalism and Modernism that we must walk, and that line is the same as has been walked by Catholics for two thousand years. Its straightness is guaranteed by the Magisterium of the Church Christ founded. But note that we do not choose this line because we are trying to split the difference, so to speak, or to achieve some sort of golden mean. No, the line came first. But others generally make mistakes in one of two different directions from the truth. One group oversimplifies the Faith, failing to give reason its due, and errs by insisting on some isolated aspect of the Faith to the point of distortion. The other group undervalues the supernatural, distrusting anything but reason, and errs when a darkened reason spins out

of control.

As one way of avoiding these and other errors in the interpretation of Scripture and the expression of our Faith, I'd like to call attention to a most useful book which is also a spiritual classic: St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Doctrine)*. This book discusses the use of language and the interpretation of Scripture. It explains why and how we can freely use the sacred text for our own spiritual nourishment even while we remain reticent and obedient to the Church with respect to its definitive meaning. It is not a long or a difficult work, and Augustine, who was a master of rhetoric, is always engaging and warm.

Let me conclude with this: True religion undertakes the daunting task of proposing a unitary mystery through the careful blending of many propositions. We are finite creatures, and so we can grasp the infinite only under one aspect at a time. Paradoxically this makes Catholicism at once an astonishing balancing act and the most secure of all doctrinal systems. But it must be taken seriously and learned carefully. May it please God that we possess a simple Faith—but not a simple doctrine.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=489>

# Benedict's Second Volume and the Historical Critical Method

March 24, 2011

*Jesus of Nazareth* Part II is out, and I'm working my way through it, not only to pass along the highlights but for spiritual reading. The Pope's first volume (see [Benedict's New Book](#), [The "Our Father" according to Benedict](#), and [A Final Note on Benedict's Jesus of Nazareth](#)) was a luminous and spiritually rich commentary on the person of Christ. This second volume focuses on Our Lord's salvific mission from His entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection: in other words, Holy Week.

## Historical Criticism

But the very first nugget which caught my attention in a book sure to be characterized by a rich vein of gold is the Pope's comments on historical criticism in his Foreword. After all, the Pope's project in this two-volume work is to recover a full awareness of the person of Jesus, a project necessitated in part by the mangled and fragmented portrait left over after the historical-critical method of Scriptural exegesis that has dominated the past two hundred years. Indeed, in the Foreword to the first volume, Benedict had written:

Historical-critical interpretation of a text seeks to discover the precise sense the words intended to convey at their time and place of origin.... [But] it is important to keep in mind that any human utterance of a certain weight contains more than the author may have been immediately aware of at the time.... At this point we get a glimmer, even on the historical level, of what inspiration means: The author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community...which is led forward by a greater power that is at work.... Neither the individual books of Holy Scripture nor the Scripture as a whole are simply a piece of literature. The Scripture emerged from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and lives within this same subject.... [And] likewise, this people does not exist alone; rather, it knows that it is led, and spoken to, by God himself, who—through men and their humanity—is at the deepest level the one speaking.

I've risked a long quotation here—though vastly condensed from the original, as suggested by the frequent ellipses—because it sets the stage so beautifully for what the Pope says in the Foreword of his second volume. I'll get to that in just a moment, but first let's take a brief look at what the reign of historical criticism has meant. We'll do this by taking just one example.

### **One Example**

Recently most right-thinking Catholics (by which of course I mean Catholics whose conclusions mirror my own!) were annoyed to learn that the latest translation of the New American Bible has replaced the word “virgin” with “young woman” in Isaiah 7:14: “The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” The passage is cited in St. Matthew in reference to the virgin birth of Our Lord (Mt 1:23).

Now there is some grounds for this change. The word “almah” in Hebrew can mean a young, unmarried woman in a rather generic sense, or it can mean more specifically a virgin. But generally in the Old Testament, when “virgin” is unambiguously intended, a different and more precise word is used, such as “betulah”. The exegete who approaches this text exclusively from the historical-critical point of view argues that Isaiah, in his own time and place, could not have had the birth of Christ in mind. Rather, the problem with which he was directly concerned was the siege of Jerusalem by the combined armies of Syria and the Northern Kingdom around 735 BC. The conception of a child by a young woman was to be a sign that the siege would be lifted and Jerusalem would continue to flourish.

And that's as far as the historical-critical method can take us, working alone and in isolation from other interpretive insights. So those who rely exclusively on this method assert that this text of Isaiah was fulfilled over seven hundred years before the birth of Christ and has nothing to do with Our Lord at all. Moreover, St. Matthew was clearly wrong, on the basis of the historical-critical method, to appropriate the text as he did.

### **The True Nature of Scripture**

You can see, therefore, why in his first volume, in discussing his own exegetical methods, Pope Benedict stresses that each portion of Scripture must be read in the context of the whole, and that each Scriptural passage is pregnant with meaning because its authorship is rooted in a community actively inspired and led by God according to His own Providential plan. Thus an early prophecy by Isaiah can operate at multiple levels, with one clear application in Isaiah's own time, and another that becomes clear only later. And St. Matthew is perfectly justified in appropriating this more distant and

deeper meaning to Christ, in whom all of Scripture finds its goal and unity.

What, then, does historical criticism do for us? Does it have any value at all? Actually, yes, because the more we know about the circumstances in which a particular passage was written, and about the immediate application of that passage, the richer is our understanding of the many ways in which that particular set of circumstances suggests a moral or a spiritual lesson, or foreshadows later developments, or otherwise illuminates God's saving action at multiple levels throughout history. To understand the historical context of Isaiah's utterance is to understand more thoroughly God's salvific power—His ability to prefigure the work of His Son not only in words but in historical events—just as the historical details of the Exodus foreshadow and enrich our understanding of what it means for Christ to save us from sin.

But to lock ourselves within the historical-critical method, as if each passage must be limited to what was naturally evident at the time it was recorded, is to deny not only the implications of the Sacred text in the communitarian tradition but also the revelatory presence of God in the life of the community, as well as the supernatural agency at work in Biblical inspiration. To put this in a single word, an excessive reliance on historical criticism denies not only the importance but the very existence of *theology*.

### **In the Hands of Pope Benedict**

Benedict himself explores a variety of exegetical insights starting in the very first chapter of his new volume, when he unpacks the meaning of the cleansing of the Temple. In so doing, he begins immediately to reveal the great depth of his appreciation of the person of Christ as Savior. He explores the historical situation, and finds that it resonates with other elements in the history of the Jewish people, elements which already invest the text with a power beyond its literal meaning. But the Pope is always open as well to the presence of God in this history, and of course to God fulfilling this history in the work of His only begotten Son.

All of this provides the context for the very first gold nugget Benedict offers in the Foreword to the second volume, where he continues the comments on the historical-critical method quoted above:

One thing is clear to me: in two hundred years of exegetical work, historical-critical exegesis has already yielded its essential fruit. If scholarly exegesis is not to exhaust itself in constantly new hypotheses, becoming theologically irrelevant, it must take a methodological step forward and see itself once again as a theological discipline, without abandoning its historical character. It must learn that the

positivistic hermeneutic on which it has been based does not constitute the only valid and definitively evolved rational approach; rather, it constitutes a specific and historically conditioned form of rationality that is both open to correction and completion and in need of it.

Following this comment, Benedict mentions that a particular Catholic theologian (whose unfortunate name the Pope kindly omits) labeled his book a *Christology from above*, “not without issuing a warning about the dangers inherent in such an approach.” But it is precisely Benedict’s point that God works in and through a community, so that His presence and His action is not only above, but below and even within, a presence which cannot be ignored without reducing the Biblical text to something less than it really is.

### **Renewed Methodology, Renewed Faith**

What the Pope calls for is “a properly developed faith-hermeneutic” as “appropriate to the text”, which “can be combined with a historical hermeneutic, aware of its limits, so as to form a methodological whole.” He states that this is “an art that needs to be constantly remastered”, and he does not “presume to claim that this combination of the two hermeneutics is already fully accomplished in my book.” Rather, he hopes his book is a significant step in the right direction. He concludes on this important point:

Fundamentally this is a matter of finally putting into practice the methodological principles formulated for exegesis by the Second Vatican Council (in *Dei Verbum* 12), a task that unfortunately has scarcely been attempted thus far.

Those who follow Pope Benedict’s lead in this—and there is growing evidence of such a movement already in progress—will effect a true renaissance in the study of the Word of God. In this way, Scripture will live once again as the living text of the people of God—that is, it will become once again what it was always intended by God to be, the Book of the Church.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=490>

# Ratzinger's Gift: Faith-Filled Exegesis

March 29, 2011

Perhaps the most important thing about Pope Benedict XVI's second volume, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, is that it raises the bar for Biblical exegesis. Scholars may be shocked by this statement, but I'll say it again. Benedict XVI is giving us a remarkable example of how reading, reflecting and commenting on Sacred Scripture should be done.

Before explaining exactly what I mean, it may be helpful to review the Magisterial status of the book. Simply stated, this is not an act of the Magisterium. It possesses no ecclesiastical authority. As Benedict himself said in the foreword to the first volume: "It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium, but is solely an expression of my personal search 'for the face of the Lord' (cf. Ps 27:8). Everyone is free, then, to contradict me" (pp. xxiii-xxiv). Whatever impact the grace of office has on Benedict the writer, it is not the impact of Authority. That is why I have entitled this essay "Ratzinger's Gift".

But it is precisely this raising of the bar in Scriptural exegesis that constitutes Ratzinger's great gift. Some have suggested that the Pope has revived "lectio divina", the traditional habit of reading Scripture prayerfully to seek the joy and nourishment of God's presence in His word. But when you or I engage in *lectio divina*, it does not generally involve attention to the original languages, a study of what other great commentators have written, and the deliberate unraveling of obscure and possibly even disputed themes. These things are the work of *exegesis* (the critical explanation or interpretation of a text).

However, one of the problems that has afflicted Scripture studies during the intense and progressive secularization of academia over the past two hundred years is that exegesis has been so frequently set against *lectio divina*. Whereas the Fathers of the Church seemed to be able to combine the two, modern figures have found this exceedingly difficult. The difference, in most cases, has been a matter of both faith and professionalism. Many commentators have not approached the Bible with any significant faith in its Divine inspiration; and even believers have been constrained by their professional "duties" to ignore the enormous benefits of faith in their studies.

The result has been the dissociation of scholarship from *lectio divina*, as if the two are incompatible or even opposed. One of Joseph Ratzinger's greatest gifts to the Church is his demonstration that this is not the case, to show that a genuine scholarly inquiry under the light of Faith yields abundant fruit in an understanding of the text that is at once more thorough and more profound.

Benedict's new volume demonstrates this achievement repeatedly. In Chapter 1, he explores textual and historical data to penetrate the episode of the cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11), and to demonstrate how Jesus has become the new Temple. In Chapter 2, he carries this theme forward, incorporating the work of historians and exegetes to show that the Christian community was so reoriented to Christ as the foundation of its relationship with God that it was unfazed by the destruction of the Temple in AD 70—a destruction which fundamentally altered Judaism. Also in this chapter is a deep examination of the so-called eschatological discourse, the meaning of the end times and the intervening “time of the Gentiles.”

In Chapter 3, the Pope explores the washing of the feet. In the context of ancient philosophy, he explains how Christ's self-giving marks a new kind of descent from the Divine to the human. Unlike the Divine emanations of the philosophers, which return to God by shedding the material, Christ both embraces and purifies human nature. Thus the way of self-emptying and martyrdom is a way not of escaping creation but of restoring all of creation to the Father.

And in Chapter 4, Benedict examines the specific wording of the high-priestly prayer of Christ, explicating through its long exegetical history key themes of eternal life, sanctification in truth, and making God's name known, so that all may be one. His exploration of this oneness as rooted in truth and mission leads inevitably to apostolic succession, Scripture, and the Creed—that is, to the constitutive elements of the visible Church.

Throughout these rich treatments we find that Benedict must unlock a layered text in which Our Lord frequently expresses Himself in Old Testament figures, images and even quotations. This fact alone gives new relevance to the history of the Jewish people, to an analysis of the OT texts, and to the trajectory of the Divine Plan over time.

My point is that at every turn Benedict pulls in whatever is relevant. It might be linguistic analysis or the redaction of the early texts; it might be ancient history or the teaching of various philosophical schools; it might be seminal insights from past commentators, both Catholic and Protestant. Always there will be a close reading of the text itself in light of its antecedents in the Old Testament, and of its thematic resonance in other portions of the New. And in the background, we see Benedict's judgments silently

illuminated by the analogy of Faith—the fact that Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church are all informed by the same Holy Spirit, and so must point together to the same Truth.

Many of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church have addressed Scripture in this way as well, not because they were professional exegetes, but because they were learned persons, often even scholars, who brought whatever they knew to bear on improving our understanding of Christ and of the Scriptures which speak of Him. Benedict not only recognizes this great tradition but alludes to its necessity in the foreword to the second volume when he explains that God works through an entire community, looking backward and forward, in inspiring the full meaning of the Biblical text (see my earlier comments, [Benedict's Second Volume and the Historical Critical Method](#)).

Ratzinger's gift is to show how even modern scholars (of which Pope Benedict XVI is obviously one) can fruitfully explore everything that relates to the text in a way that is not only compatible with but actually inspired by their Faith. In the Pope's own words, he has attempted "to develop a way of observing and listening to the Jesus of the Gospels that can indeed lead to a personal encounter and that, through a collective listening with Jesus' disciples across the ages, can indeed attain sure knowledge of the real historical figure of Jesus" (vol II, Forword, p. xvii).

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=792>

# MISCELLANY

# A bourgeois solution to ordaining women

August 09, 2011

Fr. Roy Bourgeois, who [faces expulsion from the Maryknoll Order](#) for his support of the ordination of women, gave this reason for refusing to recant:

After much reflection, study, and prayer, I believe that our Church's teaching that excludes women from the priesthood defies both faith and reason and cannot stand up to scrutiny. This teaching has nothing to do with God, but with men, and is rooted in sexism. Sexism, like racism, is a sin. And no matter how hard we may try to justify discrimination against women, in the end, it is not the way of God, but of men who want to hold on to their power.... I will not recant. I firmly believe that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is a grave injustice against women, against our Church, and against our God.

One wonders what Fr. Bourgeois has reflected on, studied, and prayed about. Apparently this examination did not include the question of how one can know for certain whether a particular viewpoint comes from God or from men.

Fr. Bourgeois seems to be unaware that what he has been personally led to believe makes no difference to the resolution of such a question. Either God has revealed things or He has not. Either the Church has the authority to state definitively what God has and has not revealed, or she has not.

It ought to be obvious that we cannot know whether God has provided for the priestly ordination of women unless God tells us, any more than we can know whether there is such a state as Hell or whether the Eucharist is the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. These things are matters of the deposit of Faith, which we believe wholly on the authority of God revealing, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived. This deposit of Faith is contained in Scripture and Tradition, and it is safeguarded (including its correct explication) only by the authority of Peter and his successors, for whom Christ prayed, that they might confirm their brothers in the Faith.

Now it just so happens that the Church has never ordained women, and this is because she has not been given the authority to do so. The presumption has always been

that this is not a mere human tradition but part of that Tradition which in turn is part of the Deposit of Faith. Moreover, on May 22, 1994—well within Fr. Bourgeois' lifetime and attracting immense media attention at the time—Pope John Paul II, perceiving growing confusion on this matter, issued an apostolic letter to repeat and clarify the Church's perennial position:

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful. ( [Ordinatio Sacerdotalis](#), #4)

But, as I said, the reflection, prayer and study of Fr. Bourgeois (so easily claimed but so poorly executed) did not include the one thing needful, that is, sitting at the feet of Christ and listening to His voice through the Magisterium of His Church. That is a very good way to learn if something offends God! To do otherwise, for a Catholic who is supposed to understand how Revelation came about and how alone it can be rightly interpreted, is very much like saying: "I reflected that I want women to be ordained; I studied all the arguments that attracted me from modern egalitarianism and feminism; and I prayed that my will would be done." No doubt Fr. Bourgeois consulted widely as well, as the disobedient always claim to do, with the notable exception of consulting God.

Dare I state the obvious? This attitude does not come from transcending ourselves and listening to God. Instead, it is the attitude of "a person whose political, economic, and social opinions are determined mainly by conventional respectability." Ironically, this is the definition of *bourgeois*.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=841>

# Ex Corde Ecclesiae in America

January 21, 2011

This year each Catholic college and university president [will meet with his local bishop](#) to review institutional progress in implementing [The Application of Ex Corde Ecclesiae in the United States](#), which the American bishops put into effect in 2001. This application grew out of Pope John Paul II's promulgation in 1990 of [Ex Corde Ecclesiae](#), an Apostolic Constitution on Catholic universities, which was the first shot in a slow but systematic effort to renew and reform Catholic higher education around the world.

“Ex corde ecclesiae” means “from the heart of the Church”. The title represents the traditional Catholic perception, and John Paul II's firm conviction, that an authentic Catholic university can develop properly only in a filial relationship with the Church, accepting her doctrines and values, guided by her Magisterium, and fostering a deeply Catholic understanding of all of reality. As the opening paragraph of the Apostolic Constitution states: “A Catholic University's privileged task is ‘to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth’.” The quotation is from an address in 1980 by Pope John Paul II at the Catholic Institute of Paris.

## Specific Norms

The entire document is well worth reading, but the most important juridical portion of it is contained in Article 2, “The Nature of a Catholic University”, which enumerates the following norms:

1. “A Catholic University, like every university, is a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge. It is dedicated to research, to teaching, and to various kinds of service in accordance with its cultural mission.”
2. “A Catholic University, as Catholic, informs and carries out its research, teaching, and all other activities with Catholic ideals, principles and attitudes. It is linked with the Church either by a formal, constitutive and statutory bond or by reason of an institutional commitment made by those responsible for it.”

3. “Every Catholic University is to make known its Catholic identity, either in a mission statement or in some other appropriate public document, unless authorized otherwise by the competent ecclesiastical Authority. The University, particularly through its structure and its regulations, is to provide means which will guarantee the expression and the preservation of this identity in a manner consistent with §2.”
4. “Catholic teaching and discipline are to influence all university activities, while the freedom of conscience of each person is to be fully respected<sup>46</sup>. Any official action or commitment of the University is to be in accord with its Catholic identity.”
5. “A Catholic University possesses the autonomy necessary to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission. Freedom in research and teaching is recognized and respected according to the principles and methods of each individual discipline, so long as the rights of the individual and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good<sup>47</sup>.”

The U.S. bishops took nine years to develop a specific approach to the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, and two more years to implement the norms. During this process there was considerable consultation with Catholic university administrators. This undoubtedly made the bishops more sensitive to some of the unique problems faced by American institutions, but it also gave them a preview of the excuses some universities are using to resist the process of regaining their Catholic identity. In any case, in addition to the broad outlines of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the bishops’ *Application* document emphasized a comprehensive list of specific points relating to the boards of trustees, administration, faculty and students, of which the following are a representative sample:

- Each member of the board must be committed to the institution’s Catholic identity.
- The university president should be Catholic and each member of the staff and faculty must be informed of the institution’s Catholic identity, mission, and practices, as well as encouraged to participate in the institution’s spiritual life as much as possible.
- The university should strive to appoint Catholics to faculty positions and,

wherever possible, the majority of faculty should be Catholic.

- All professors must exhibit not only competence and good character but respect for Catholic doctrine.
- Theology should be taught at each institution, and formal theological discussions and events should be planned to address key issues.
- Both the university and the bishops have the right to expect theologians to present authentic Catholic teaching. Theology professors have a “duty to be faithful to the Church’s Magisterium as the authoritative interpreter of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.”
- Catholics who teach theology must have a *mandatum* (a license or approval to teach) from the competent ecclesiastical authority.
- Students should have the opportunity, and Catholic students have the right, to be educated in the Church’s moral and religious principles and social teachings and to participate in the life of faith.

## Excuses

I mentioned that the bishops have had ample opportunity to become acquainted with the excuses various institutions would use to resist the process of Catholic reform and renewal. It may prove useful to review the four principal excuses here.

**Academic Freedom:** The first and most common is the claim that *academic freedom* necessitates the complete independence of professors in all universities from any prior intellectual commitment to truth, let alone submission to the Magisterium of the Church. This excuse misunderstands not only the nature of intellectual inquiry but the liberating effect that the proper understanding of some truths has on the effective exploration of others. Not even secular scholars start from a position of complete ignorance or agnosticism in examining each new academic question. If they did, they would be starting over with each new question—or with each new day and even each new moment—and they would never make any progress at all.

Moreover, once one grasps any given truth, that understanding becomes an important step in investigating and understanding other truths, which must always fit together in describing one seamless reality. In addition, Catholics recognize, as John Paul II put it, “the fount of truth”. There can be no more certain source of truth than Divine Revelation as authentically interpreted by the Magisterium of the Church. The truths brought to our understanding through Revelation shed a magnificent light on reality, and so ought to

enable Catholics, all other things being equal, to make greater progress in exploring other aspects of reality than anyone else. Finally, it is naturally the defining note of a Catholic university that its professors generally start from a position of accepting and understanding Catholic doctrine, viewing this as an important foundation for a fruitful intellectual life. Thus academic freedom can never be properly cited either as a reason to avoid prior truth commitments or, in a Catholic institution, as a way of “protecting” oneself from the influence of truths known and taught by the Catholic Church.

**American Peculiarities:** The excuse most likely to be encountered in the second place arises from the so-called peculiarity of the American situation. The argument is that US law restricts something, or Federal policy requires something, or American custom demands something that prevents American universities from maintaining a Catholic identity. In general, however, these requirements relate either to the type of institutional governance required to grant degrees or the ideological disposition of programs which operate under governmental grants. (But in the latter instance academic freedom might well be threatened, and we have a right to expect a resistance which is only too often erroneously directed against the Church.)

The requirements of institutional governance to grant degrees in the United States typically relate to keeping ultimate institutional control in a board of trustees rather than in the employees of the institution; this has nothing to do with what is necessary to maintain a Catholic identity. And any Catholic institution, if it is to maintain its integrity, must refuse grants which require it to compromise its institutional identity. This is true even if it means the sacrifice of an important program or of leadership in some particular area. It will undoubtedly be true that authentically Catholic institutions, in an increasingly militantly secular society, will operate at a disadvantage in one respect or another. But it can hardly help a *Catholic* institution to become less Catholic to gain a material advantage. The result would be to make society as a whole more militantly secular.

**Elite Status:** The third excuse is the need to maintain an institution’s “elite status”. Many allegedly Catholic universities (Notre Dame is a well-documented case) have made a point in recent decades of hiring a broad range of professors with non-Catholic (or even anti-Catholic) commitments, whether secular or alternatively religious, on the grounds that, first, the university is getting the very best people for each position and, second, the university thereby presents a truly diverse academic image to the world, which somehow makes it a better representative of what a university should be. Unfortunately, both of these reasons rely heavily on understandings of “excellence” borrowed from secular culture.

Clearly someone might have reached the status of a leader in his or her field as much for fitting in well with the prevailing secular cultural atmosphere as for truly being the one clear “best” practitioner of an art or science. And when it comes to seeking truth, there can be no intrinsic superiority in populating a faculty with people who hold as many different ideas and beliefs as possible rather than with those, primarily, who accept the Catholic Faith. To be sure, intellectual diversity can help in avoiding those academic pitfalls which arise from complacency or narrowness, but it can also set people back a good distance on the path of understanding reality, and this very frequently has enormous negative consequences for fruitful scholarship. Catholic universities should not allow “excellence” to be defined for them by secular approbation, which so often takes its cues from fads or the support of favorite causes; they should seek the best faculty to fulfill their own internal purposes; if they do so, their faculties will almost always be predominantly—though at times not exclusively—Catholic.

**Theological Autonomy:** The fourth and final major excuse is the demand for theological autonomy. Here it is argued that theologians have a vital role to play in the development of Christian understanding, and that this role will suffer enormously if the decisions of those outside the theological fraternity (that is, popes and bishops) have a controlling voice in the ongoing discussion. Theologians who think this way, and university administrators who agree with them, frequently talk about the absolute necessity that review and criticism be restricted to their theological peers. Of course by “theological peers” they mean other mostly Modernist academic theologians like themselves, not a group of theologians which professes complete obedience to the Magisterium of the Church.

Be that as it may, such theologians misunderstand the very nature of their craft. It is certainly true that a new theological idea or development can sometimes be misunderstood or unfairly mistrusted by those in ecclesiastical authority, who might in consequence wish to put the brakes on certain lines of thought. This has happened and it will happen again. But it is not nearly so damaging as the fundamental refusal of Catholic theologians to recognize that their very discipline depends on the existence of a deposit of Faith, in Scripture and Tradition, which can be authentically interpreted only by the authority of the Catholic Church. Lacking this, there is no basis for theology to be anything but idle speculation—or what Modernists would perhaps prefer to call the articulation of the religious consciousness of each particular age. This is an argument requiring no intelligence to resist. Courage to oppose the Lollipop Guild is all that is necessary.

## Conclusion

A number of Catholic colleges and universities which had somewhat gleefully downgraded their Catholic identity during the heyday of secularist euphoria in the 1960's and 1970's have since begun to take seriously their need to restore that identity, especially since the promulgation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The [Cardinal Newman Society](#) monitors these developments, reports on them, and maintains a slowly growing list of institutions it thinks have gotten their identities back. The process is taking a very long time, of course, and that is probably mostly because the rest of the Church has not been healthy or strong enough to apply the necessary pressure.

But it is also true that Catholic universities, in the United States and elsewhere, tend to be tough nuts to crack. Most of them are now independent of direct ecclesiastical control, so it takes a long process of rebuilding relationships with university leaders and trustees to effect change. Some of them are in the hands of religious orders which themselves have deep, perhaps insurmountable, problems with fidelity to the Church; Jesuit schools are the leading example. Moreover, this year's initiative of having each president meet with his local bishop will inevitably have spotty results, because the American episcopate is still so varied in its own degrees of fidelity and courage. Add to this that there is only so much that even the best bishops can do without the good will of the institutional leaders in question.

For all those reasons, the 2011 round of meetings will likely be simply one more small, incremental step. That may not be ideal, but it is still a good thing. It can only hasten the day when most Catholic universities will again derive their missions from and seek their successes within the living and infinitely fruitful fount of truth, which pours forth from the heart of the Church.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=482>

# Ecumenism: The Conversion Question

January 27, 2011

At Vespers on January 25th, Pope Benedict stressed the obligation each Christian has [to work for Christian unity](#). That is clearly true, of course; after all, Our Lord prayed that His disciples might all be one. But the difficulty of the task and the desire to avoid offending people often leads to a misunderstanding of what is involved. We may concentrate so much on impersonal programs and policies that we forget the personal demands which the quest for Christian unity inevitably imposes.

Much as we may work at this or that aspect of ecumenism, it remains impossible to separate the general cause of Christian unity from the need for direct, personal conversion. I do not exclude the conversion of Catholics to a deeper respect for their Christian brothers and sisters, but this is not the type of ultimate conversion I have in mind. An interesting case of what I do have in mind is found in Gilbert Meilaender's article in the February 2011 issue of *First Things*, entitled "The Catholic I Am". The title is very interesting indeed, because Meilaender is a Lutheran.

A frequent contributor to *First Things* currently serving as Remick Fellow at the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture, Meilaender is a deeply-committed Christian who reflects from time to time on the prospect of reunion with Rome. In his essay, he offers reasons for staying where he is, firmly in the Lutheran communion, and for the Lutheran communion staying where it is, firmly within itself. We have seen just this pattern of argument before—this enumeration of reasons to stand pat—and it often marks a middle stage in the process of conversion to Catholicism. Time alone will tell, but the argument is sufficiently desperate to be worth exploring.

## The Catholic Tradition

Like the Anglicans of Newman's generation, and many before and since, Meilaender chooses to see being Lutheran as one of several ways of living as part of the catholic tradition. Here "catholic" (small c) is perceived as the tradition of faith passed on to us in Scripture and by the Apostles, and represented not only by Roman Catholicism but by Orthodoxy and Protestantism.

Meilaender is not insensitive to a certain confusion about this tradition. Just as we Catholics would distinguish and oppose trends in our own Church which devalue the tradition (*e.g.*, Modernism and the secularization of Catholic thought), so Meilaender recognizes that not all Protestants really seek to live within the tradition. He knows that the mainline Protestant churches have largely been assimilated by secular culture, and this raises questions about the capacity of the tradition for self-preservation. But we'll set them aside for now.

Suffice it to say that Meilaender sees himself and Lutheranism as a legitimate part of this catholic tradition, one which in the sixteenth century offered a corrective to certain departures from the authentic tradition by the Roman Church, and one which still has an important and distinctive role to play in preserving the catholic tradition and passing it on.

Meilaender enumerates several distinctive features of Lutheranism and Protestantism more generally, but he does not help his case by permitting one of them to loom larger than it should:

A church without the hymns of Charles Wesley is one I would rather not contemplate. Indeed, one need only occasionally attend a Mass here and there (an experience that has never failed to prove disappointing for me) to be forced to ponder what a world without classical Protestant hymnody would be like.

I say this not to poke fun at Meilaender (as an argument, this sort of personal attachment ranks only slightly above the question of whether to use catsup on scrambled eggs), but to indicate how intensely emotional are the comforts of our own religious traditions, how much they have to do with our upbringing, formation and tastes, and how easily we confuse them (as all of us do) with true religion. And then, of course, we grow to regard our own tastes as important manifestations of the “catholic tradition”, from which convenient vantage point they serve as mighty justifications for our own rectitude.

Meilaender acknowledges that Martin Luther did not begin by wanting to form a separate church, and that the quarrels of the sixteenth century over justification by Faith are no longer particularly sharp. Ultimately, to his credit, he abandons the argument that it is important for any Christian group to be “distinctive”. But at the same time, he believes it foolish to jettison the five hundred years of history which have shaped Lutheran religiosity within the larger catholic tradition, and from which—since these things are to Meilaender all part of the same catholic tradition—he has not yet found a compelling reason to turn away. What is perhaps the central passage of his article runs as

follows:

For my part, I believe that the Church's genuine oneness need not be translated into institutional unity. If this commits me to believing that the one holy catholic and apostolic Church is "invisible", that's all right. Invisibility in this sense is not a way of escaping from time, place, and embodiment. On the contrary, it is a way of taking time seriously, a way of recognizing the multiform manner in which the one Church—under, surely, the governance of the Holy Spirit—has taken shape in human history. Energy devoted to reshaping Lutheran ministries and practices in order to make them satisfactory to Rome is energy better spent, I suspect, in shaping the lives of Christian people in faithful obedience and in being the voice of Christ in and to the world.

### **Mere Christianity**

The logical response is to ask, "What spirit was really at work, and how do we know? Also, obedience to what? And which alleged voice of Christ?" The trouble with all this is that it presupposes what C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity", which in turn presupposes three other principles, all of which are demonstrably false. First, mere Christianity assumes that the beliefs most Christians hold in common are somehow more central or important to Christianity than the beliefs over which they differ, as if mere Christianity is not exactly what it would otherwise appear logically to be, namely merely a Christianity which is missing a number of vital parts, and so is inevitably both broken and dysfunctional.

Second, mere Christianity assumes that it has within it the means to preserve itself when, in fact, one of the things it leaves out is the very authority principle so essential to self-preservation, the one thing required to prevent any group from claiming whatever it wants to be true, the devastating results of which are easily demonstrated through both logic and history. And third, mere Christianity assumes that the differences among various Christian groups are insufficiently powerful to undermine the effectiveness of Christian witness throughout the world, rendering Christianity not so much a witness to truth as the ultimate witness to the proposition that truth is unknowable (if even Christians cannot agree about it). The falsity of this assumption is obvious to anyone who has studied the secularization of the Western world since the Protestant Revolt.

Now the Christian tradition in any form carries within it, as the Second Vatican Council taught so luminously, a number of engraced goods provided by God for our

growth in holiness and salvation, and so by virtue of these goods it remains immensely powerful even when it is limping along incomplete. Therefore, it is easy to see why, having experienced Christ through an incomplete tradition, and having witnessed personally that tradition's power to draw one into greater union with God, any Christian can overlook what may be missing. He may notice it not at all, or regard it as decidedly secondary, or airily dismiss it as false. But as soon as we do notice and begin to examine seriously the differences among various Christian bodies, we must surely beware of deploying a definition of "catholic tradition" which ignores the potential game-breaking dimensions of these very differences.

Mere Christianity, of which I take this concept of "catholic tradition" as a type, simply begs too many questions. Moreover, these questions are, or ought to be, particularly hard to ignore in the face of the sheer size of the Roman Catholic Church in comparison with all others. Even Meilaender notices this elephant in the room, though it has not (yet) frightened him out of his small "c" complacency.

For, yes, in his arguments for staying where he is, Meilaender evidences a certain complacency about true unity, a complacency incomprehensible to an equally-committed Catholic—as did Newman before him while an Anglican, and as do all those who fail to see the importance of Pope Benedict's recent insistence that efforts toward Christian unity are without question the responsibility of each and every one of us.

## Conversion

Ecumenism involves many things, from simple acts of kindness to those in different Christian "communities" to formal explorations of theological differences, in the hope of improving relations and resolving such differences through means which both parties actually accept. Such ecumenical initiatives are important insofar as they remove unnecessary obstacles to unity. But ultimately, ecumenism cannot avoid the question of conversion.

Conversion can be considered partially without losing face, by making use of the idea of unity as an exchange of goods. Indeed, Catholics would be foolish not to see that non-Catholic Christian groups have both prized and fostered certain legitimate aspects of the Catholic (large C) tradition in ways which go beyond their practice and emphasis in contemporary Roman Catholicism. Thus, for example, the Catholic can view the incorporation of the Evangelical emphasis on proclaiming the Gospel in daily life as a gift—an important reminder of a point which is in fact resoundingly Catholic but often neglected—and so too can the Catholic view positively the incorporation of the otherworldly, contemplative attitude of the Orthodox tradition, as manifested, for

example, in the use of icons.

But at some point, the non-Catholic party in ecumenical activity, in the quest for Christian unity, must learn to recognize the gifts he can receive from the Catholic Church as not only essential to a full Christianity but as unattainable by any means short of institutional union. To take Meilaender's case again, at some point the Lutheran must recognize that Christianity can be full and complete without Wesleyan hymnody but it cannot be full and complete without the authority of Peter, a legitimate priesthood, and all seven sacraments. And in recognizing this truth, the Lutheran must also recognize that these goods cannot be appropriated without institutional unity. Or, to put it another way, they cannot be appropriated without *conversion to Catholicism*.

It goes without saying that these things are worth converting for, as is every other element of the authentic Catholic tradition, every good in it that has been given to us by God as one more key and critical portion of His plan for our union with Him for all eternity. Again, one can understand how some Christian group could ignore those features of the Catholic faith which differ from its own beliefs, or could even dismiss them reflexively as false. But once these differences have really caught someone's attention, would he dare to suggest that any of them is unimportant or unworthy of the most painstaking examination? What if the authority of Peter really is the sole effective guarantor of Christian truth? Could one then reasonably argue that conversion is unnecessary? Would it really suffice to feed only on those grapes which just happen to have fallen close to the vine?

Thus the question of conversion cannot be avoided, though advocates of the great catholic tradition may forestall its consideration because they do not yet recognize the remarkable weakness of their position. At the Last Supper, on the same occasion when Our Lord prayed that all his followers would be one as He and the Father are one (Jn 17:11), He also prayed that his followers would be sanctified in truth (17), even going so far, in referring to His death, as to say: "And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (19).

At some point in the quest for Christian unity, at some point in the ecumenical task, the non-Catholic party must recognize that he is missing the full truth revealed in Jesus Christ. And then he must care enough about being "consecrated in truth" to be willing to leave his comfort zone. There is no help for it. He must embrace Rome. He cannot rest until he converts.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=483>

# Attacking Transubstantiation

May 25, 2010

Good Jesuits must be gritting their teeth as a prominent member of their Order does it again. Fr. Michael Kelly, the Jesuit leader of the Asian Catholic news agency, is uncomfortable with the forthcoming liturgical translations, which more closely match the Latin text and strive for a greater sense of the sacred. Apparently, this led him to remember once again the benefits of translations that are vague, horizontal and banal, namely, that they obscure the Faith. The danger, [as Fr. Kelly sees it](#), is this:

Regrettably, all too frequently, the only Presence focused on is Christ's presence in the elements of bread and wine. Inadequately described as the change of the "substance" (not the "accidents") of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist carries the intellectual baggage of a physics no one accepts. Aristotelian physics makes such nice, however implausible and now unintelligible, distinctions. They are meaningless in the post-Newtonian world of quantum physics, which is the scientific context we live in today.

This is actually fairly funny. First, it is such a blatantly obvious use of the Modernist tactic of indirection. Fr. Kelly doesn't question the truth of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. No, he is simply concerned that: (a) People pay too much attention to it in relation to other forms of Christ's presence; and (b) The way the Church explains it is based on Aristotelian physics, which nobody finds intelligible today. It is such a shame. We can envision Fr. Kelly wringing his hands.

By now everybody knows the real issue: Fr. Michael Kelly does not believe that Christ is present body, blood, soul and divinity in the Eucharist. That's a unique form of Presence (which is why Catholics call it "Real Presence"), unlike all the other forms which are spiritual only, in the same way the Holy Spirit is present to us. There are strong links to the Incarnation in the dogma of the Real Presence. Thus one would not be surprised to hear Fr. Kelly questioning the Incarnation next week, and it probably goes without saying that he interprets the "Resurrection event" as a faith-symbol of the early Church (though why there would have been any faith to symbolize if a real physical resurrection had not occurred is something the Modernists never explain).

But what about this physics stuff? Well, in fact, the Church's teaching on transubstantiation, including the traditional distinction between substance and accidents, is not based on physics at all, but on metaphysics. It is a distinction in philosophy, not in natural science. As Fr. Kelly would know if he were an educated man, natural science deals only with *phenomena*—with how things manifest themselves to our senses. Natural science is not at all designed to examine the actual “being” of things, or what we might call their substance. That doesn't mean natural science can't give us clues about being from the phenomena that natural things present to our senses. It just means that natural science is confined to the study of phenomena, and nothing more.

But the Church, being more interested in essences (and, as an institution, far better educated than Fr. Kelly), understands that phenomena and being are not identical and that, in particular, phenomena does not exhaust being, any more than the shape of your nose or the sound of your voice captures the essence of what and who you are. So the Church adopts the useful philosophical distinction between substance and accidents to show that the mystery of transubstantiation, while it certainly transcends reason, does not violate reason. Somehow, what the bread IS and what the wine IS has been changed into the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ, even though their manifestation to our senses (that is, their measurable phenomena) remain unchanged. To put this in the terms that great theologians such as Thomas Aquinas have used, the substance has changed, but the accidents have not.

This explanation may be incomprehensible to a modern Modernist like Fr. Kelly, though a great many modern physicists have no trouble at all with it. Nor should they, as it contradicts absolutely nothing in their own specialty. But whether or not the explanation is incomprehensible to Fr. Kelly or anyone else, the mystery itself is certainly incomprehensible, and to everyone. That's why we believe it not based on physics or philosophy but solely on the authority of God revealing, that is, based on the words and actions of Jesus Christ. You may know Jesus as the Incarnate God who proved Himself by rising from the dead. Have I mentioned that Fr. Kelly almost certainly does not?

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=652>

# Salvation for Non-Catholics: Not a New Idea

August 05, 2010

The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* cites St. Paul's letter to the Romans when it asserts the possibility for salvation for non-Catholics and even for non-Christians. The assertion is made in the process of explaining the stages of Revelation. I've argued many times that this possibility has always been held by the Church. Indeed, the Letter to the Romans shows that a proper understanding of the question was already outlined in Sacred Scripture itself.

I was reminded of the controversy when I [summarized \*Dei Verbum\*](#) earlier in the week, though I passed over it in the interests of brevity. I return to it now because so many seem to misunderstand it. The passage in question occurs early in the first chapter where the Council discusses God's preliminary self-revelation through created things. The fathers state:

God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1:3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Rom. 1:19-20). Planning to make known the way of heavenly salvation, He went further and from the start manifested Himself to our first parents. Then after the fall His promise of redemption aroused in them the hope of being saved (see Gen. 3:15) and from that time on He ceaselessly kept the human race in His care, to give eternal life to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation (see Rom. 2:6-7).

The text then proceeds to the call of Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets, and finally to the coming of Christ Himself.

Now, from the quoted passage in this Dogmatic Constitution, we see the Church asserting again that even non-Christians can be saved (as many Traditionalists and Feeneyites have flatly denied) and that, furthermore, they can be saved without a last-minute chance to accept Christ and the Church through a private revelation offered to those deemed sufficiently oriented toward the good (as some modern Feeneyites, struggling to hold a position more compatible with Catholic teaching, now argue). Rather, the Council states that it is simply part of God's Providential care for man to

give eternal life “to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation”.

It goes without saying that the salvation of every person of whatsoever condition is made possible only by Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. One must be incorporated somehow into Christ to be saved, and this includes a real if mysterious joining to His mystical body the Church, even for those who are not juridical members. Pope John Paul II called this “substantial” rather than “formal” membership, and I do not question it. But here we are talking about what God requires for salvation from those who have been given very little, and in fact what he requires is that they “perseveringly do good in search of salvation” according to whatever understanding of the Good and God they have been given, even if this is only from creation itself. It is this response to whatever grace the Holy Spirit has written in their hearts which alone suffices to join them to Christ in an invisible way.

The Conciliar reference, again, is to Romans 2:6-7. St. Paul is rebuking Jews who think they will be saved by the Law while those without the Law will, by that fact alone, be damned. This is very similar to the case of those who trust in juridical (external) membership in the Church, as if all formal members are pleasing to God and all those beyond the bounds of formal membership are reprobate. But Paul says this is not how God works:

*For He will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (Rom 2:6-8) (portion cited by the Council in italics)*

The rest of the relevant verses in chapter 2 are equally instructive:

There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when,

according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom 2:8-16)

It is not at all a new idea, then, that salvation is possible to those who do not know Christ or His Church. The equally certain teaching that “outside the Church there is no salvation” refers to the fact that all those who respond properly to whatever grace they are given are mysteriously joined to Christ, and in fact are substantial if not formal members of the Church, as several Popes have taught using various terms to express the idea. Clearly, then, anyone who understands what the Church is and knowingly rejects her cannot be saved. But those who, despite their unfortunate ignorance, “perseveringly do good in search of salvation” can be.

The conscious opportunity to draw into union with God using the totality of graces and teachings present only in the Church is an incomparable gift. The beauty and wonder of this gift is only magnified by the fact that salvation is also possible without it. Of course, this too has its dangers, for to whom much has been given, from him much will be demanded (Lk 12:48). But nowhere in the relevant Magisterial texts down through the centuries is there any teaching that—for those who have been given little—something they have not been given will be required.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=681>

# Salvation for Non-Catholics and Limbo

August 11, 2010

Continuing my survey of *Sound Off!* comments on [Salvation for Non-Catholics: Not a New Idea](#), I see that Laudeturjc1162 notes a similarity in this discussion with the problems surrounding the salvation of unbaptized infants and the theory of limbo. This is worth pursuing.

In this context, limbo is a state of natural happiness for unbaptized infants who cannot be guilty of personal sin. The theory is that since the human person lacks the supernatural capacity to enjoy God before he is baptized, and since infants and very young children cannot receive this supernatural gift through baptism of desire, then after death they must enjoy a maximum of natural happiness, but not the vision of God—hence limbo. Although this has been a widespread idea in Catholic circles for a long time, it has never attained any official status; at best it was a common theological opinion.

The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not offer the theory of limbo; instead, it suggests that we may hope that God has a way we do not know to “let the children come to me” (see #1261; cf. Mt 19:14). Similarly, the most recent major Vatican study of the the question of salvation for unbaptized infants (the 2007 document issued by the International Theological Commission, [The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized](#)) concludes that there are good grounds for abandoning the concept of limbo.

This is highly relevant not because we know the answer, but precisely because we do not know exactly how salvation works for unbaptized infants. The situation is similar in some ways to the question of salvation for adults outside the visible borders and sacramental structure of the Church, but there are some differences. When I refer to infants and adults, of course, I really mean all those who are incapable of personal sin on the one hand and all those who have matured sufficiently to sin personally on the other. Indeed, this is the first difference: Since no rational adult can claim innocence, there is no need to worry about the fate of rational adults who are completely guiltless. That, if you will, is the dark side of this question.

On the bright side, however, such adults can do more than sin; they can also desire God, and the Church does officially teach a way of salvation for adults outside the visible structure of the Church. This way is often called baptism by desire. Thus Pius XII, in his great encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, explained that those outside the visible structure of the Church can “have a certain relationship with the Mystical Body of the Redeemer” by means of “an unconscious desire and longing” (*inscio quodam desiderio ac voto*) (#103). It is this teaching that has led theologians to examine the possibility of “substantial” membership in the Church even where “formal” membership is lacking. (There is also, of course, baptism by blood—martyrdom—but that applies only to believing Christians who are killed for their faith before being baptized.)

The two cases—unbaptized infants and adults who, as Vatican II put it in *Dei Verbum*, “perseveringly do good in search of salvation”—have in common the key fact that even the Catholic Church does not know everything about how God works to draw all men to Himself (cf. Jn 12:32). What we as Catholics do know is what we might call the ordinary, programmatic and certain way—and definitely the easiest way—to grow in holiness and union with God and be rewarded with eternal life. But the Church does not know exactly, in all its details, how God works to save those who have no chance to seek Him, or who do seek Him diligently but cannot, through no fault of their own, follow the Catholic high road to heaven.

Moreover, the Church is very conscious of her limitations here. Without completely understanding how God does it, she knows, as St. Paul put it, that God “desires all men to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4), and so it is unthinkable that He would damn those who have not incurred the guilt of rejecting that salvation. For this reason, she is able to hope for the salvation of unbaptized infants and she is able to state without doubt that those who “perseveringly do good in search of salvation” can be joined in some mysterious way to herself and so attain eternal salvation in Christ.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=683>

# ENRICHMENT

# Theological Fidelity

November 19, 2010

The late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, founding editor of *First Things*, famously said that the solution to priestly sex abuse was threefold: “Fidelity, fidelity, and fidelity.” His point (among other examples of fidelity) was that if priests were faithful to their calling, they wouldn’t be abusers; if bishops were faithful to the mission of the Church, they would not create situations in which obvious potential abusers were first ordained and then protected; and if theologians were faithful to Divine Revelation and the Magisterium, they would not rewrite moral theology to justify the kinds of sexual behavior which have always been condemned as sinful.

Theological fidelity is an important topic today because the lack of it is still a huge problem in Catholic colleges and universities around the world. Sadly, particularly in Jesuit schools, many ostensibly Catholic theologians dissent against Church teachings even on issues as obviously fundamental as the identity of Christ, the authority of the Magisterium, the nature of the Eucharist, the ordination of women, and sexual morality. Given that dissent is typically culture-driven, the usual pattern is for unfaithful theologians to begin by attempting to “reconceptualize” Catholic teachings on human sexuality to suit the times (and doubtless in many cases their own personal weaknesses). This inevitably leads to the need to “reconceptualize” Church authority and, ultimately, even the normative character of Revelation itself.

Now the first thing any competent Catholic theologian must realize—and the one thing without which he or she simply cannot be a Catholic theologian—is that theology is the servant of Revelation and of the authority principle in the Catholic Church. Theology has been aptly defined as faith seeking understanding, but faith for the Christian means acceptance of what is revealed to us by God Himself. Without Revelation, there is no basis for either faith or theology. And without the authority Christ established in His Church, there is no reliable guide to what may or may not be ascribed to Divine Revelation.

So the Catholic theologian is called by the very nature of his craft to seek a deeper understanding of what has been revealed and to do that within the authoritative judgment of the Church as to both the character and the ultimate meaning of this Revelation. If a theologian dissents either from the fact of Revelation or from the authoritative

understanding of what Revelation is, then he simply cannot do Catholic theology. That would be a contradiction in terms.

For this very reason, any claim to a right of dissent based on academic freedom may be dismissed out of hand. Indeed, any notion of academic freedom which purports to free a scholar from the intrinsic nature of his discipline is nonsensical in the extreme. For example, for a theologian to argue that his own theological study leads him to conclude that the Magisterium's definition of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is defective is no less absurd than for him to claim that his own theological study leads him to understand that Christ never existed.

The intellectual bankruptcy of such positions may be illustrated by an analogy. This is exactly like a physicist saying that his specialized study has led him to conclude that there is no such thing as the material world. He may have reached that conclusion in some personal way, but not as a physicist. Moreover, he can no longer claim to be a physicist after reaching that conclusion, because he has in one fell swoop eliminated the very object of his field of study. In just the same way, a Catholic theologian cannot claim to be a Catholic theologian while asserting that there is no Revelation, or that Revelation is wrong, or that his understanding of Revelation differs from that of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. Again, in reaching these conclusions, he has eliminated the object—that is, the very data—which it is the purpose of Catholic theology to study. These are the data which faith seeks to understand through theology.

I will close with a telling quote from Pope Paul VI, a quote which applies all too well nearly half a century later:

It is true that the Church always has a duty to try to obtain a deeper understanding of the unfathomable mysteries of God (which are so rich in their saving effects) and to present them in ways even more suited to the successive generations. However, in fulfilling this inescapable duty of study and research, it must do everything it can to ensure that Christian teaching is not damaged. For if that happened, many devout souls would become confused and perplexed—which unfortunately is what is happening at present. (Homily, June 30, 1968)

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=734>

# What Does it Mean to Be Saved?

September 01, 2011

A point that confuses both Catholics and Protestants is what Scripture means when it speaks of “salvation” or being “saved”. Protestants, following Luther, often think that being saved in Scripture refers to making it to heaven, without reference to membership in the Church. They further frequently suggest that all that is necessary to be saved is to accept Jesus Christ as one’s personal savior, who covers over one’s sins. Catholics, on the other hand, have traditionally regarded salvation as coming through the Church, and sometimes believe that those who have not become formal members of the Church cannot be saved.

Both groups also frequently misapply common Biblical passages in the same way. For example, they cite Our Lord’s saying that “Many are called but few are chosen” (Mt 22:14) to prove that relatively few people are saved. Or they may cite the dictum “Strive to enter by the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (Lk 13:24), and similar passages from St. Matthew’s gospel (*e.g.*, Mt 17:13-14). The most important confusion in all this is that when the New Testament refers to the path to life, it is often referring not to heaven but to the Church; and when it talks about “salvation” or being “saved”, it may be referring either to gaining heaven or to entering the Church. (It is also worth noting that, in the Old Testament, the idea of being “saved” very commonly refers to rescue from the evils of this life.)

## Turning to St. Paul

St. Paul wrote the textbook on salvation, but one must be careful of two things. The first is *context*. In some passages, Paul is clearly talking about membership in the Church; in others, he is referring to eternal life; yet he uses the same root term, which we translate by *salvation*, *save* or *saved*. The second is that Paul frequently shifts between what we may call a “focused” and a “factual” view (here I am following the terminology of an outstanding Scripture scholar, the late Fr. William G. Most).

For example, in the focused view he might talk about the impossibility of being saved under the Law, because the Law *qua* law has no saving power and does not lead to life. In this focused view, considering the Law as a *system*, it cannot offer salvation. But in another passage, emphasizing a broader actual, or factual, view of how grace works

among men in all ages, St. Paul will teach that many Jews who do not know Christ do in fact attain heaven, and Gentiles also, because regardless of the specific system one finds oneself in, the Holy Spirit is at work, and some form of salvific grace—all of which is available by virtue of Christ—is given. It just doesn't come through the Law (or, for gentiles) through any particular human belief or practice.

It is not possible to treat these questions thoroughly in one brief article. A book by Fr. Most that I have mentioned before, *The Thought of St. Paul: A Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, provides the definitive commentary for this purpose, just as his earlier landmark work, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God: New Answers to Old Questions*, is the definitive study of how grace works.

But I can highlight a few key areas in St. Paul so the reader can trust these assertions generally. Take, for example, Romans 9:27, 10:10, 11:14 and 11:25-26. Here they all are, in order:

- “And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved.’” (Rom 9:27)
- “For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.” (Rom 10:10)
- “Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them.” (Rom 11:13-14)
- “Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved.” (Rom 11:25-26)

### **The Meaning of “salvation” and “saved”**

Conditioned as we are by our modern use of the word “saved”, these passages all seem to refer to eternal salvation. Yet note the contrast between the first and third passage, on the one hand, and the fourth on the other. In the first and third, Paul says only a remnant or “some” will be saved; in the final instance, he says “all Israel will be saved.” This is because throughout the preceding passages in Romans, St. Paul is using “saved” to refer to membership in the Chosen People, the People of God, which is now shifting from the Jews to those who respond to God’s “call”. This word “call” is always used by St. Paul to mean the invitation to become a member of Christ, that is, to join the Church. It is not

that most of Israel will be damned and at the same time all Israel will attain eternal life. Rather, Isaiah's prophecy foresees that only a remnant of Israel will (initially) become members of the Church, but Paul sees further and records that, in God's Providential plan, the Gentiles will prepare the way for "all Israel" to enter the Church (though, of course, exactly what this means remains a mystery).

If we turn now to the second passage, we see that it is the key to the others. For in many places, St. Paul states clearly that unless we are like Christ (his great *syn Christo* theme) we will not inherit eternal life. It is never enough, as the Gospel of Matthew points out (7:21), just to say "Lord, Lord". Moreover, Paul had clearly stated earlier in Romans that even some of the Gentiles would be saved *without* explicit adherence to Christ:

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my Gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom 2:14-16)

So now we begin to see that Romans 10:10, like the verses cited before and after it, refers to membership in the Church: "For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved." In other words, by our formal confession with our lips we are brought into full communion with the Church. But some who do not confess with their lips will attain eternal life, and not all who confess with their lips will get that far.

### **Eternal Life**

By contrast, in other passages St. Paul clearly has eternal salvation in mind when he talks about being saved or obtaining salvation, and when he does speak in that context, he gives quite a different picture. For example, we have his exhortation to the Philippians:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil 2:12-13)

Here he is clearly referring not to membership in the Church but to the continuing an

often difficult process of working toward one's ultimate salvation—one's entry into eternal life—through faithfulness to the spirit of Christ day by day. Nothing could be farther from the typical Protestant misunderstanding of attaining eternal life through a one-time acceptance of Christ as one's personal savior.

The Epistle to the Romans is Paul's masterwork on being incorporated into Christ. This, he teaches, is achieved by following the Spirit of Christ as the Holy Spirit writes it upon our hearts, whether or not we know enough to become a professed Christian or a formal member of the Church, explicitly. Of course he also presses the importance of the Church at every turn, an importance I have frequently stressed elsewhere. But Romans is an exceedingly difficult book, not only because Paul typically jumps rapidly from point to point (and this, surely, is partly because he dictated his letters, hence composing them orally on the fly), but because as need arises he switches between what we have called the focused and the factual view.

For example, in the passages in which Paul expresses his frustration that so many Jews are failing to remain part of the People of God by refusing to join the Church—and in contrasting this membership in Christ with being under the Law—Paul normally relies on the focused view. As we saw earlier, the Law *as such* cannot produce life. But in contrast, the Church *as such* is fail-safe. The Church cannot produce anything but life! Again, Fr. Most also refers to this as the “system as system” view. It reveals both the salvific power of the Body of Christ and the tremendous advantage of being joined explicitly to it in the Church.

But in the broader, or factual view, some in the Church will resist and ultimately reject the manifold graces God offers through the Church, and so they will be eternally lost. And in similar fashion, as we have already seen, some who are not formally members of the Church, will be substantially joined to her and achieve final salvation because, by responding to the Spirit of Christ offered by the Holy Spirit in their lives, they will mysteriously join themselves to Christ, and hence have some place in His Body the Church.

### Carefully, Very Carefully

It goes without saying that this discussion provides an additional key lesson. How carefully must we approach the Word of God! We must approach it humbly, not insisting that it means what we come to it thinking it ought to mean. We must study it thoroughly. And we must be attentive to the teachings of the Church, to whom alone the Sacred Scriptures have been entrusted. In doing this last, we will find keys in Magisterial teaching for understanding difficult and sometimes apparently contradictory texts, such

as (in this case) the teachings of Pope Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis Christi*, the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*, and Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*, all of which develop our understanding of how salvation works, and so make it easier to keep up with St. Paul in his earlier explanation of the same thing.

It also goes without saying, or so I hope, that we do well to reflect on what the Church teaches about the ways in which we can ultimately be separated from Christ, even though we retain a formal membership in His Church. Truly, we must all work out our salvation in fear and trembling, freely allowing God to work in us, for His good pleasure. And if we remain receptive to her teachings and her sacraments—to all the Church’s means of grace—then the Church cannot engender anything in us but holiness and eternal life. In this focused view, the two meanings of the word *salvation* merge.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=505>

# None So Blind: Obedience is an Antidote to Stupidity

November 11, 2011

Except with infallible doctrines, obedience is not an infallible safeguard. But it can go a long way toward knocking the stuffing out of us, by which I mean the sheer stupidity we generally fall into when we are too fond of our own judgment and our own will. To paraphrase Psalm 14:1: The fool says in his heart, “I need not obey.”

A person who lives in a glass house should not throw stones, but we see this in Protestantism all the time. Lacking any authority principle, relying instead on the principle of private judgment, many Protestants hold strong opinions on religious issues despite a near total lack of study of the sources of Revelation. Their view is often that Scripture is as plain as a 21st century newspaper and so whatever they think it means must necessarily be true, no matter how much it conflicts with other parts of Scripture or the Christian tradition, or even with the alternative views of many other contemporary Protestants, or even with what we might at times justly call common sense.

The absurdities to which this leads are legion. Yet, sad to say, we all have a tendency to assert our own lame theories wildly. To take a modest case, a man who does not wish to fast will frequently rail against the damnably authoritarian nature of Church rules. Yet if he is wise, he will obey them anyway. What he will find is that this act of obedience will help him to detach himself from his own will. Once sufficient detachment is achieved, his view of both the rules and the fasting itself are almost certain to change.

In a contrary fashion, Modernism was born among those who, being essentially worldly, also did not like (in a very broad and general sense) to fast. But these were intellectuals. So, instead of obeying, they developed a cosmic theory about religion and cultural perception to prove that fasting does not suit the consciousness of modern man and therefore no longer has value as a religious practice. Believe me, I am oversimplifying only slightly. I am reminded of the priest who complained that he disliked the Stations of the Cross because they were such a penance.

Well, yes. We understand the rebellion of the natural man. We understand how rationalization occurs, and how capable it makes us of spinning out theories to justify this rebellion. But if we obey even the non-infallible disciplinary decisions of those set

over us in the Church, we are much more likely to see our theories for what they so commonly are: Excuses for inordinate attachment.

The need for obedience is most obvious with respect to doctrinal issues on which the Church cannot err, and here too the habit of obedience tends to detach us from an excessive fondness for our own judgments. A moment's reflection enables us to realize that this actually makes us more objective, and therefore more open to truth.

But infallibility is not essential to the ability of obedience to serve its purpose, as my brief discussion of fasting suggests. This purpose is also served in prudential matters, about which good people can disagree. Nor is obedience valuable only for those who would prefer to do less than the Church requires. There are many who would prefer to do more, and who are prone to condemn authority for not demanding enough. Note that on either side, the prudential judgment of the objector may at times be better than that of the ecclesiastical superiors. This is hardly impossible. But those who object will still benefit more by cheerfully following what the Church prescribes than by insisting on doing things their own way, because the key value of obedience is that it detaches us from our own wills.

The dangers of such attachment are very great. The fallout spreads rapidly from practices and attitudes to ideas and doctrines. Again and again we observe a pattern in those who, having denounced legitimate authority for its failure to implement the right set of requirements, go on over time to deny authority altogether, or to contradict not only disciplinary norms but infallible teachings. To those who remain obedient, it soon becomes evident that insofar as someone is frequently or habitually disobedient to legitimate ecclesiastical authority, the extremism or even absurdity of that person's views and assertions increases at a very high rate.

Liturgical disobedience is a perennial case in point. Those who obediently make proper use of the liturgy the Church imposes, even when they find it lacking, and whether or not they are priests or laity, invariably grow spiritually. As a direct result, they remain at least somewhat detached from their own views, preferences and passions; they are prone to assess the views of others more charitably and prudently; and in consequence they generally avoid putting themselves on display as fools and idiots. Not so those who insist on saying or hearing Mass in their own way, certain that their own preferences constitute a superior norm. These are soon ready to condemn anything that interferes with their own predilections, to judge every issue according to their own passions, and to assess every virtue by their own lights. They almost invariably soon begin to voice extreme and absolute opinions that are absurd on their face.

An excellent example would be the Modernist distortions of the ordinary form of the

Roman Rite that drove obedient Catholics nearly mad a generation ago. These distortions were accompanied by a whole litany of doctrinal and social assertions as shallow as they were outlandish. But for obvious reasons we here at CatholicCulture.org do not currently hear from all that many Modernists. We still hear with some frequency, however, from those who are not slow to speak foolishly on the other side. Thus I have seen it roundly asserted on more than one occasion that Modernism itself will not be driven from the Church until we have a pope who will make the Tridentine Mass the sole form of worship. This change alone, they claim, will eliminate Modernism.

The mind boggles. One wonders what such persons think the prevailing form of the rite was when Pope St. Pius X became so appalled by the inroads of Modernism that he felt the need to condemn it. Or again, one wonders what form of the rite was in effect when Modernist theological advisors attempted to hijack the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council and, failing that, hastened to report the Council falsely in the world press. Unfortunately, when people *on any side* fail to cultivate a true spirit of obedience through the actual positive and ungrudging practice of the virtue, they cannot help but to multiply stupidities to the point of scandal. This happens to all who fail to learn not just outward obedience, but obedience in their hearts.

And why? Because they are increasingly attached to their own judgment and their own will. Thus they have no remedy for their own weakness, their own blindness. This never takes long to show.

Church authority may at times seem to us too strong and at other times too weak. It may even seem on the whole to be prudentially ill-suited to the times. Yet it is truly marvelous how obedience even to an arguably poor disciplinary authority will invariably breed wisdom and general spiritual health. It is no wonder: By this virtue and this virtue alone do we become increasingly detached from our own wills. In contrast, disobedience almost infallibly makes one ever more a fool. Moreover, it does so quickly and, to everyone else, obviously. There really are none so blind as those who refuse to see.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=890>

# Success and Failure in the Church

March 23, 2012

Whenever the problem of parish closings comes up (see, for example, Phil Lawler's critique in [The patron saint of parish closings](#)) I have two very strong reactions. First, I agree wholeheartedly that (under many if not most) circumstances it is a negative judgment on Catholic commitment and leadership when a parish closes. One would at least like to see creative and energetic parish revitalization efforts, in which the most attractive and evangelical priests in the diocese seek to channel the energies of those who oppose a potential closing into a dynamic and salvific community mission.

But I always have a second reaction as well. I very seriously wonder whether there are not larger forces at work for which the current generation of Catholics cannot be blamed. If memory serves, I first addressed this at slightly greater length about two years ago in [Expecting Catholic Growth](#). The subject really requires a full-length book, and it is very likely that both reactions are warranted. The truth, I suspect, does not fall between but sits firmly upon two stools. But as the first reaction has just been argued, let me suggest here some reasons for the second:

- **The Long-Term Trend:** Just as certainly as Christianity was on the rise in the West from its founding until the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, so also has it been on the wane for the past five hundred years. Despite the best efforts of many generations of highly committed Catholics, including innumerable great saints, this decline has proven inexorable.
- **The Division of Christianity:** One important reason for this decline is unquestionably the division of Christianity by the Protestant Revolt. This has made it difficult to take Christianity seriously as a source of certainty. Ecumenism has thus far accomplished little to solve the problem.
- **Material Success:** In the centuries following the Protestant Revolt, the West experienced greater cultural diversity, explosive growth in prosperity and therefore increasing democracy. It has become increasingly difficult to convince Westerners of either the legitimacy or the need for strong and consistent spiritual authority and values.

- **Cultural Superiority:** When Christian influence was on the rise, it was clear that the Church herself was the chief custodian of culture, preserving the best of classical civilization, and able to teach the nations not only about Christ and theology but about agriculture, philosophy, literature, science, and even politics. Having succeeded, she now appeals for purely spiritual reasons, or not at all.
- **The Paralysis of the Church:** The Church herself has scarcely known how to deal with these enormous shifts. First, she fought brilliant actions such as her Counter Reformation and her missions to every corner of the earth. Then, seeing herself nonetheless all but fully dispossessed, she turned inward, as symbolized by the “prisoner in the Vatican” response. Finally, she perceived the need for a fresh evangelical engagement with the West, but this has been perverted in countless ways by Catholics already too damaged by a hostile culture.

Many other points of analysis could be introduced, but two things seem clear: First, the full scope of what we are up against is largely beyond the ability of today’s serious Catholics to control; second, the Church herself, during all the permutations she has tried over the past five hundred years, has yet to find an effective response. And yet Saints Patrick and Boniface could convert entire nations (even if only in an initially rudimentary way) in a single generation. That this should be so in one place and time and not in another is simply not explicable only in terms of the amount of zeal on offer. There are many circumstances at work, some identifiable and some not. And all is part of the mystery of Divine Providence.

We might both argue and hope that in our own time we are at the beginning of a sea change. Outside the West, the growth of Christianity (including Catholicism) is quite astonishing, even in the formerly intractable East. Within the West, surely the decline of a cohesive and positive culture cannot go on very much longer without human misery increasing to a point which will bring a new openness to the message of Christ. What made the West great was its specifically Christian impetus. The West’s ongoing prosperity and cultural success always depended largely on her own forgotten Christian patrimony. In a word, most people thought and acted in largely Christian ways for a long time, and many important institutions endured, even after personal faith had died. But the patrimony is now all but used up. Widespread pagan confusion and despair are once again on the horizon.

Moreover, there are many reasons to hope that the Church is slowly succeeding in finding an effective formula for engagement with the declining West. If the Church

continues to heal and strengthen as the West continues to decline and sicken, then we may be on the verge of a long period of renewed Christian growth. But it is a very different thing to evangelize those who know nothing of the Faith—those who are lost in belief systems that are obviously less consistent, less helpful, and less hopeful. It is far harder to persuade a dominant culture which remembers of Christianity only the myth that it was abandoned for good reason. This may well require a sad interval of deeper forgetfulness, against the day when once again the Faith can be perceived as fresh and new.

Meanwhile there remains much about “success” and “failure” that we do not understand, including what the words really mean in the economy of salvation. And that is why not one of us is called to be successful in any measurable way. Rather, we are called, first, to be faithful and, second, to accept God’s mercy when we are not. This is enough to ensure that we will pray and work hard to make things better, and it is certainly possible that we will receive the grace of witnessing the positive results of our fidelity. But whether this happens or not, success itself is out of our hands.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=948>

# Grace and Rationalization: Closely Linked

November 17, 2011

In studying the Catholic doctrine on grace, a fascinating connection emerges between rationalization and grace—or rather resistance to grace. I believe this explains quite a bit of what we instinctively sense about those who live and foster immoral lifestyles. It explains why those who are sensitive to these things always wonder what people are running away from when they come up with the usual inadequate reasons for their behavior.

The Catholic doctrine of grace holds first that grace is offered to all men, second that we are incapable of doing any good thing in a meritorious way without it, and third that we are nonetheless fully responsible if we do evil instead. Here's how it works:

1. God gives us a grace which causes the intellect to recognize some good and the will to take an initial complacency in that good.
2. Recognizing this, we either initially resist the grace through the free exercise of our will, or we do not resist it but instead initially simply do nothing at all.
3. If we do nothing at all, the grace moves us toward the good and, utilizing the power of grace, our own wills freely choose the completion of the necessary good action in cooperation with the grace.
4. But if we initially resist, the grace that has been given fails in its effect, and we choose to sin. We are capable of doing this under our own power because sin is a deficiency, and man is capable of deficiency unaided by grace.

Now note what resistance to grace consists of. It consists of a turning of the will away from the good God has brought to our attention through grace. And part of this turning occurs when the will commands the intellect to cease to recognize the goodness it has apprehended.

Then the intellect serves the will either by a simple darkening or, more likely, by the exercise of its natural ability but in such a way as to satisfy the will's command that what was momentarily apprehended as good is really not good at all, or at least not a necessary

good. This, of course, is the beginning of rationalization.

If we are habitually properly responsive to grace, we learn to recognize this sort of rationalization in ourselves, either looking back on earlier situations, or in present moments of weakness. Those who are habitually responsive to grace also perceive it very clearly in those who are not. But it remains very difficult to convince people that they are rationalizing, for the whole point is that the will refuses to permit the intellect to admit the truth because the will has rebelled against this particular good.

I suspect our readers will see this, now that I've pointed it out: Rationalization is what the intellect does when the will commands it to turn away from some good that grace has enabled it to apprehend.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=892>

# Doctrine, Discipline and Holiness: Not Always What They Seem

February 14, 2012

A letter in the latest *Adoremus Bulletin* reminded me that we “conservative Catholics” can go off the rails, at times, on disciplinary questions. The correspondent insisted that only musical instruments made from God’s own materials (that is, natural materials) were appropriate for use in Church. This was apparently taken from some papal prescription made somewhere during the Church’s long history. Wood, yes; plastic, no.

I referred here to “conservative Catholics”, but let me pause to emphasize that I don’t like to use adjectives before the word “Catholic”. To be fully Catholic means to be baptized, to accept the teachings of the Church on faith and morals, to obey ecclesiastical superiors wherever they have authority, and to use the gifts made available through the Church to grow in holiness. If we make a conscious decision to distance ourselves from any of these criteria, we throw our Catholicism into grave doubt; otherwise, regardless of our degree of perfection at the moment, we are completely justified in describing ourselves as “Catholic”.

Nonetheless, some adjectives are useful for indicating the tendencies of particular groups of Catholics, and every human tendency will ultimately lead to trouble if it is not corrected, shaped and perfected by participation in the life of the Church. Thus, for example, those whom we might call “liberal Catholics” will tend to speak more about charity and less about doctrine and discipline, while those whom we might call “conservative Catholics” will tend to speak more about doctrine and discipline and less about charity.

In fact, the so-called conservative Catholic will often view the liberal as deficient in truth, while the so-called liberal Catholic will often view the conservative as deficient in charity. Properly tempered and perfected, however, both dispositions can lead, through a life of increasing holiness, to that “*caritas in veritate*” (charity in truth) which Pope Benedict described in his encyclical by the same name. But both dispositions can also take us right off the rails of the narrow way that leads to life.

## Liberal and Conservative Tendencies

I won't dwell here on the characteristic mistakes of "liberal" Catholics, which typically arise from the uncritical acceptance of worldly ideas at the expense of a solid commitment to Catholic doctrine, and which place at grave risk the knowledge of what it actually means to love. Since most of those who support our work tend to be "conservative" Catholics, it is more to the point to take a look at a different set of characteristic mistakes. And these arise from a tendency to confuse orthodoxy and love, as well as a corresponding tendency to believe, despite the lessons of history, that particular ecclesiastical disciplines can cause the problems of the Church to disappear.

I have already hinted that authentic love requires authentic orthodoxy. Those who are ignorant of, or in rebellion against, Catholic teaching inevitably advocate many objective evils in the name of love, because—not understanding the Good—they cannot truly act for the good of another, which is the very definition of love. The plain fact is that we cannot love properly if we do not first honor the truth. And it is similarly important to notice that obedience to those ecclesiastical disciplines which the Church imposes upon us serve as a gateway to love. By humbling ourselves and giving up our own wills in these disciplinary and devotional matters, we become less selfish and so more open to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

But adherence to Catholic teaching is not enough, and it is even dangerous if it leads us to neglect either the gifts or the needs of others because they somehow do not "measure up". It is also spiritually dangerous to take pride in our discipline, especially when it leads us to look down upon those who lack our wonderful fervor. Both orthodoxy and ecclesiastical or personal spiritual discipline can, when animated by the wrong Spirit, cater to our amazing capacity for self-respect. Wrongly used, they can lead, just like laziness and worldliness, to spiritual illness and death. The Devil himself is orthodox. The moment we take "holy satisfaction" in ourselves, it is a sure sign that we are suffering dangerously from the illusion of self-love.

### **The Nature of Discipline**

Sometimes, at the level of ecclesiastical discipline, this problem can actually be quite humorous. I recall being in a discussion, when I was in my early 20s, with two priests, the one fairly old, the other quite young. We were coming up on Lent. The younger priest—and this was in the early 1970s—commented that he intensely disliked the Stations of the Cross because they were "such a penance." I never could figure out whether he was joking. The older priest turned to him and said just two words: "Yes. And?"

I can remember, too, in the early days of Christendom College, when I was serving

as a professor and the Director of Academic Affairs, and promoting the College like mad, that we received two letters from angry Catholics who had seen pictures of some of the female students wearing slacks. Citing Pope Pius XII, who had warned the women of Catholic Action against the fashion of wearing pants, these folks insisted that we could not possibly succeed in our mission unless we imposed the proper dress code.

It was not my first experience with people of one idea, nor was it to be my last.

The various specific instructions for ecclesiastical discipline and for engaging the larger culture change with time and place, and what is best for one group in one period may not be so for another group in another period. Moreover, some practices or fashions may be construed to represent an unfortunate tendency in one particular cultural “atmosphere” while communicating no such moral or ideological meaning in another. The same applies to particular penitential practices, liturgical rubrics, popular devotions, and so on. These can change with time, place and situation. Decisions about them may be good or bad even at the time they are made. A spirit of piety is always significant, but the importance of particular practices varies greatly, with time, place, situation and personality.

### More Examples

Thus I find it both disturbing and somewhat amusing when someone writes in to “point out” that nothing we can do to renew the Church and society will have any effect until “the immemorial Tridentine Mass is restored”, as if the grace of Christ has never flowed (and can never flow) through any other liturgical form, and as if their own perception must be the liturgical rule for the whole Church, both East and West. And others sometimes write that we will make no spiritual gains until the world is consecrated to the Immaculate Heart (which, in fact, has already been done, but not to their personal satisfaction). Or that the only effective way to combat some evil is with a Rosary rally. Or that a true spirit of renewal requires that women cover their heads in church.

All of which brings me back to the (inadvertently humorous) letter in the *Adoremus Bulletin*, in which the correspondent itemized those things which were absolutely necessary for the proper use of liturgical music in Church. His first point was that “only the human voice is the preferred ‘instrument’ in the Church, as this is the instrument directly created by God.” His second was that “other instruments are tolerated...[but] the sound created by the instrument should be derived from God’s creation, i.e., wood, metal, or other natural substances.” And his third point was that, while this stricture permitted pipe organs, it obviously meant that “electric organs are not appropriate for Catholic churches, as the sound produced by these instruments is not derived from

natural substances.”

What this writer did was thumb through a book on papal legislation on sacred music in which, at one time or another over a 1900-year period, various popes had stipulated or suggested these various pastoral or disciplinary (certainly not doctrinal) points. Hence his insistence on “Vatican-based standards” to solve the problem of liturgical music once and for all. The writer was a medical doctor. One is tempted to remark that he remembers how to read a prescription but has forgotten how important it is for prescriptions to be changed as conditions change.

### **The Spiritual Point**

Now I hope no one will misunderstand my point. Precisely because Catholic doctrine is essential to true charity, its importance cannot be overstated. And precisely because Catholic and/or spiritual discipline is designed to dispose us to the transformation of all our attachments into a Single Love, we neglect or despise it at our peril.

But neither intellectual commitment nor disciplinary zeal is the same as love. Just as doctrine is dangerous when it becomes a source of complacency, by which we mentally and emotionally wash ourselves and then separate the washed from the unwashed, so too is discipline dangerous when it is absolutized—when we regard it as something more than provisional. Disciplinary practices are to be prized not because of their own intrinsic value but because of their suitability to the end of charity, which consists primarily in our own self-abnegation, by which we sacrifice our own will to the will of another, whether to God Himself or to our ecclesiastical superiors who represent God.

Truth, discipline, orthodoxy, piety: All of these are ultimately directed to doing God’s will, which is the sole and final measure of spiritual growth. God cares nothing for our knowledge of the truth if it does not lead us to love rightly, and He scorns our petty disciplines if they do not lead us to love Himself more, and others in Him. “Behold,” said Samuel of old, “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). And at the very moment of the Incarnation, Our Blessed Lord said, “Sacrifices and offerings thou has not desired, but a body has thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou has taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God’” (Heb 10:5-7).

Do we think there is no justice at all or ever when those who are not quite like us accuse us of being pharisaical? Do we suppose the accusation represents nothing but their own miserable failure to see our priceless virtue? Are we never guilty? I cannot say “no”, so I prefer to think there is more to it, and to look to the speck in my own eye. Those of us with these particular tendencies must meditate often—not for despair but for charity!—on these words of Jesus Christ:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean. (Mt 23:23-26)

And perhaps the next verse should be taken like a bracing tonic, at the start of each new day, as we set out anew to teach others how to live: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones.”

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=524>

# The Catholic Side of Salvation

August 12, 2010

If non-Catholics can be saved, why does it matter if we become Catholic or remain Catholic, or try to convert others to Catholicism? After following our discussion here on the possibility of salvation for non-Catholics, one of our readers suggested that it would be very useful to address that question. I agree. If a person can be saved regardless of the religion (or no religion) in which he finds himself, why should we cling to our Faith and attempt to share it with others?

## **An Initial Catch-22**

There is, of course, a Catch-22 here, because once you understand the value of Catholicism, the question is closed. It may be all very well for someone else to remain non-Catholic, but once one knows what Catholicism is, it is clear that to reject it is to turn one's back on God and His Providence. So those who understand their Faith—but who just once in a while wish it could be otherwise—have eliminated by their own conscious knowledge whatever “hope” for escape they might otherwise have had! If you're a good Catholic who is tempted by a questionable way to make money, by a romantic dalliance to which you have no right, by a wish that various charitable causes would simply leave you alone (ahem), or by the prospect of lying abed on Sunday morning after having partied all through Saturday evening and Saturday night—well, sorry, but as the saying goes, you're hoist with your own petard.

In plain English, you're blown up by your own bomb, and you know it. Ultimately you don't mind unless you're really in a personal crisis, because you already understand that the Catholic Church offers the fullness of what God the Father has made available in Christ for our salvation and that, in consequence, the Church is far and away the easiest and most certain road to eternal happiness. Finally, in knowing that, you also know two other things. First, you know that if you turn your back on the Church, you're rejecting God and the Good you know, which makes salvation impossible in any context. Second, you know that you have an incomparably valuable and wonderful gift which, if you really care about anybody but yourself, you'll want to share with others.

## **Turning Things Right Side Up**

Now while this is the whole answer in brief, there are much richer ways of expressing it. One of the problems that prevents us from expressing this richness is our preoccupation with the question of personal salvation. I'm reminded of the evangelical Christians who used to walk up to me at college and ask me whether I was saved. Indeed, ever since sectarian divisions arose in the 16th century, even Catholics have thought more about their Faith in terms of salvation than they did before. As recently as the first half of the twentieth century, this preoccupation with the question of salvation too often took center stage in ordinary Catholic life. Thus it has often been said, including by theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger, that there was a strong cultural tendency among Catholics at that time to live the Faith *prescriptively*: Just give me the rules; tell me the minimum set of things I have to do to get to Heaven; oh, and let me know what it takes to make Purgatory, too.

Yet this almost exclusive focus on the question of salvation actually looks at the Faith from the wrong end, defining it too much in terms of one ego-centric result. I don't mean to say that personal salvation is unimportant. Certainly Our Lord talked about it. But thinking about religion primarily in terms of personal salvation is an essentially Protestant idea. A religious scholar named Paul Hacker actually turned this problem into an extraordinarily perceptive book about the Protestant Reformation entitled *The Ego in Faith*. The serious Protestant wants to know if a man has accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior. In broad terms, the purpose of religion for Protestants is to gain salvation. The essential and far richer purpose for Catholics, however, has always been to give glory to God.

Now as soon as we say this, we grasp instantly that it is true, but how often do we forget! And once we remember that it is true, we suddenly start looking at religion from the right end again; we turn the whole thing right side up. At its very core, Catholicism *isn't about me*, or at least not primarily. It's about God. And secondarily, it's about my relationship with God, and yours, and every human person's.

### **Glory, Love and Grace**

God is pure being, without beginning or end, the one whose essence is existence, the only one who can truthfully call Himself "I am who am" (Ex 3:14). He is so awesomely beyond and above us that our only appropriate response is: "Glory!" He is also the Creator of everything else that exists, all of which depends completely and utterly upon Him. Again, "Glory be to God!" And He is a Trinity of burning love, by His very nature impelled to share Himself in love with others, whom He has created simply to be loved, to know what it means to be in love. Once again, "Glory!"

Finally, to draw us into this ecstasy of love, He makes Himself present to us through the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. And after Jesus Christ came into the world, taught us everything we needed to know about the Father, established His Church and prepared for His final act of obedience to the Father's will, what does He say to the Father about His purpose and the purpose of His disciples? He says it is all for the glory of God. Read Saint John's Gospel:

I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do; and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made. I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word. Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me. I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them. (Jn 17:4-10)

### **An Engine of Unity**

To give glory to God, we must keep His every word, insofar as we know it; and if we are so blessed as to know all His words through His only begotten Son, then we must embrace and live in the very Word of God Himself. This is not a demand so much as a gift. Remember that the central task of the Word in history is to reconcile us to the Father or, as I said above, to bring us into an ecstatic union of love with Him. To conceive of this as a burden, or to weigh it up in terms of a series of requirements, is to miss the point entirely. But we cannot be caught up in an ecstasy of infinite love merely by offering our own natural and finite love. Thus a central feature of God's plan is that He should actually share His Divine life with us, not only loving us but enabling us to love Him back with His own supernatural love, now made our own through grace.

At last we are getting somewhere in answering our question of why we should become Catholic, or remain Catholic, or bring others to Catholicism. To respond to God as He so ardently wishes, by drawing into a union of love with Him, we need all the assistance we can get: All the knowledge of Himself that He has provided; all the guidance He has given as to the attitudes and behaviors we need to modify in order to love properly; and as large a share in His very life—that is, as much grace—as we can

pack in. These things come to man through Christ and His Holy Spirit operating in and through the Catholic Church—the Church Christ founded and committed to Peter and the Twelve, the leaders of the Church of whom He said so very clearly: “He who hears you hears me” (Lk 10:16).

The Catholic Church is a veritable engine of unity with God. Her structures and sacred hierarchy, her Faith and securely infallible teaching, her sacramental life of grace, and her very members—sinners in flux, with all their faults—are also Christ’s mystical body, the locus of his presence on earth, and the ultimate source and font of every grace to all, even those outside her visible borders. To enjoy the gift of God’s saving love fully, to draw into the fullest possible union with Him, and so to glorify Him to the best of our ability as He wishes to be glorified, we must participate as vigorously in the Church as we know how, and we must share this immense gift with others as much as we can. For indeed it would be churlish on our part, and more than worthy of condemnation, to be willfully satisfied with anything less than all that God has offered—as if to spurn our Lover’s gifts.

### **The Kingdom of God**

This same criterion of willful satisfaction applies equally to all persons, and the Church’s teaching on salvation both within and outside of the Church’s sacramental system depends on this very thing: We must not turn away from whatever Good we know, and we must always seek earnestly to know more of the Good, and ultimately know the Author of all that is good. Because Catholics have the opportunity to participate more richly than anyone else in this knowledge and in the grace to grow into union with the only One who can truly be called “good” (Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19), Catholics possess incomparable blessings—blessings on which they are bound, so to speak, to capitalize. Remember the parable of the talents (Mt 25)!

So far we have been considering this matter from the personal point of view, which is valid enough, but it is also necessary to broaden it to its full scope, and ultimately to the new heavens and the new earth promised to us by Christ Himself (2 Pet 3). For Our Lord came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, which even now through the Church grows like the proverbial mustard seed in the hearts of men. This Kingdom has, inescapably, a social dimension, an outflowing to others of the love we share with God. Indeed, since the Church worships and grows as a community, its individual members are part of a community of love, a community which extends itself to all in every need, both natural and supernatural.

The reign of God has already begun in Christ: “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast

out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). It is made present each time we share the love of God that we have received, glorifying Him by keeping His words, by living in Christ—that is, by doing His will. Those of us in the West are beginning again to see, with the decline of Christian influence, what we once took for granted: The enormous decline in genuine care for one another and the immense misguidedness of human efforts to make things better. In other places which are becoming heavily Christian for the first time, people can see this from the opposite side: How much more mutual help there is, and how much better-directed human effort becomes, under the influence of Christ!

The Kingdom of God struggles against the darkness, of course, and appears often to be intermingled with it. But insofar as Catholics become better and more numerous, and insofar as they invest the social order with Catholic teaching and the love of Christ, so does the Kingdom of God penetrate the world more widely and deeply in both its natural and supernatural dimensions. For grace, while it does not replace nature, always perfects it.

### **Sharing in the Sufferings of Christ**

This matter of extending the Kingdom of God brings me to a final point. God wishes to be glorified by entering into a union of love with you and me, and He also wishes to be glorified by this union with every soul. It is for this reason that He has made His Church a font of grace, and for this reason He has also given it a missionary charge: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). This is a clarion call to make converts, insofar as we are able, for the glory of God, a process of glorification which also includes that other little result, personal salvation.

But there is a deeper mode of participation in Christ’s work than missionary work. St. Paul put it this way: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). By an almost incredible act of condescension, God makes us partners with Christ in doing exactly what Christ Himself claimed His supreme sacrifice would do: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:32). This is, if you will, a stunning amplification of the parable of the talents. Indeed, to whom much has been given, from him much will be expected. We Catholics are privileged—yes, *privileged*—to become so intimately united with Christ that we can enhance in our own lives His very sufferings for the good of the Church. Note that the

other side of this rare coin is the supremely high calling to help extend Christ's salvific power.

We possess, then, by virtue of being Catholic, a share in the spiritual responsibility for all of our brothers and sisters, both within and outside the visible borders of the Catholic Church. We are called to make reparation for sin, to win forgiveness, and to increase the flow of grace available to all those who, in whatsoever condition, are or should be struggling to know and follow the good that must ultimately lead to God through Christ. By our own holiness, which is a deep union with God through the effective appropriation of grace, we are invited—no, we are actually expected—to strengthen and increase the mysterious ways in which the Holy Spirit, flowing out from Christ and His Church, touches the hearts of each and every person in the continuous drama of bringing all of them closer to their Father in Heaven.

Above all we are called to do this by our intense glorification of Christ in the Church, by which we offer everything we have to Him and with Him to the Father for the sake of souls. How was it that Saint Paul described God's method? To his saints, said the Apostle, "God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). It is Christ we proclaim, Paul continued, "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ" (Col 1:28).

Being Catholic is our glory, the glory due to God, and an incomparable potential gift to every man, woman and child whom God calls son, daughter and friend. Here we find glory upon glory. Ultimately, that is why we are to become Catholic, to remain Catholic, and to do all we can to draw others to embrace Catholicism. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam. To the greater glory of God!*

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=457>

# About CatholicCulture.org

The chapters of this book appeared first on the Trinity Communications website, [CatholicCulture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org).

Our website includes many more Catholic materials, including daily news, commentary, liturgical year resources, Church documents, reviews, and collections of historic Catholic writings and references. You can also sign up for daily and weekly email newsletters.

Trinity Communications is a non-profit corporation. If you would like to support our work, please register and contribute on the website; or mail a check or money order along with your email address to Trinity Communications, P.O. Box 582, Manassas, VA 20108, USA.

We look forward to seeing you at [www.catholicculture.org](http://www.catholicculture.org).