Vatican II and Its Legacy

PART ONE OF TWO: LOOKING BACK AT 50 YEARS

What Happened to Aquinas at Vatican II?

*Michael Attridge*

*Dignitatis Humanae* and the New Evangelization

*Joseph Stuart*

Parsing *Nostra Aetate*: Vatican II and the Multiple Foundations of Interreligious Dialogue

*Reid Locklin*

The Sacrament of Confirmation and the Second Vatican Council

*Richard Bernier*

Freedom of the Laity in the Church

*Claude Ryan*

Joseph Ratzinger in the Era of Vatican II:
A Very German Conversation in the European World of Letters

*Tracey Rowland*
Since Cardinal Newman is often referred to as the “Father of Vatican II”— and even if this epithet can be somewhat misleading—it seems fitting that in these anniversary years of the Second Vatican Council that The Newman Rambler, which bears the “Council Father’s” name, should turn its attention to Vatican II’s achievements, as well as to the questions it still continues to raise. This issue, then, is the first of two geared both to commemorating and evaluating Vatican II and its legacy 50 years after it took place.

In today’s world, as in the era of Vatican II, the Church faces adversities which seem daunting and unri-valed; yet some of these are not entirely new. One of the enduring struggles, albeit more complex than ever, is that of religious freedom. As this issue of The Rambler was going to press, the unveiling of the Quebec Charter of Values was merely the latest example in Canada (there have been similar instances abroad) of a government’s attempt to legislate non-religious uniformity, and thus to deprive those citizens who happen to be religious of protection, even to the point of provoking their exodus from society and dividing communities that ought to be striving instead to cultivate friendship and deeper understandings.

In addition to religious freedom, the essays in this issue recall the equally harrowing yet different struggles faced by the Council Fathers in the wake of World War II, including the urgent attempt to establish a “more positive” theological dialogue with the modern world — as with other faith traditions and the Jewish people, in particular — freed from the concerns of the preceding anti-modernist campaign.

The doctrinal statements of Vatican II on religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and the laity, to name just three, certainly constituted a “development” in the broadest sense of that term, but they also truly displayed continuity with the Church’s longstanding commitment to answer particular questions tied to particular times and places in ways that might satisfy rigorous testing. As our understanding of Vatican II continues to unfold, some of these questions remain pertinent even today, as do the deep insights into church and society that they continue to yield.

I hope you will find the contents of this issue as stimulating as I did, and that you are encouraged and edified by the concern of its authors for the good of humanity, which they display in opening up for us some of the treasures of Vatican II. If you are pleased with what you will see and read, know that our second issue on Vatican II is not to be missed. A copy may be ordered in advance by contacting us at The Newman Centre of McGill. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Robert Di Pede, PhD
Introduction: Setting Up the Question

Theologians and historians of the Roman Catholic Church familiar with the 19th and 20th centuries will notice a profound change in Catholic magisterial teaching between the late 19th century and the Second Vatican Council in the mid-20th. In 1879, shortly after his election to the papacy, Leo XIII issued an encyclical entitled: *Aeterni Patris*. Concerned about the emerging secular philosophies of the 17th and 18th centuries, Leo encouraged the restoration and promotion of Christian philosophy, especially that of the scholastic thinker, Thomas Aquinas. The Pope dedicated almost half of his encyclical to praising Aquinas’ work and urged that he, along with other scholastic philosophers and theologians, be implemented in universities and seminaries, especially to young seminarians. Scholastic thought, he said, is the weapon to defend the Catholic faith against the “machinations and craft of a certain false wisdom.” Aquinas would help in protecting students and society as a whole against the “plague of perverse opinions” arising from the previous centuries (*AP*, § 28).

The impact of the encyclical was widespread and long-lasting. John O’Malley wrote that “few papal pronouncements have had such success in securing a course of action” as this one of Leo XIII. [2] Together with the Romanticism for the Middle Ages that swept through Europe in the 19th century, *Aeterni Patris* began a “powerful Neo-Thomist movement within Catholicism.” The Pope instructed the Gregorian University in Rome to teach only Thomism and later pressured the other Roman schools to do much the same. [3] He created the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas and later commissioned the publication of a critical edition of the complete works of Aquinas—the so-called “leonine edition.” This movement, referred to as “modern Neo-Thomism” was a development within a broader Neo-Scholastic movement, which sought...
to revive mediaeval, Scholastic theology and apply it to contemporary problems. [4] Neo-Scholasticism, with this particular form of 19th century Thomism, and the theological system that followed, would characterize almost singularly the official Roman Catholic theological method in the decades of the 20th century that followed. Early in the 20th century, in response to the Modernist cry “Back to Kant”, Roman theologians were frequently heard to shout even louder: “Back to Thomas!” [5]

Almost eighty years after Aeterni Patris, another Pope, John XXIII, only months after his election, announced his intention to hold an ecumenical council—the twenty-first in the history of the Church. It was the first Council in almost a century and the first full Council in almost four hundred years, since Vatican I had ended prematurely due to the Franco-Prussian War. It took sixteen months to prepare agenda items for this newly-announced Council and another eight-twenty-eight months to draft the initial schemata. The Council, known as Vatican II, opened in October 1962. Twenty-five hundred bishops attended Vatican II (approximately 100 from Canada), together with hundreds of theologians, as well as ecumenical observers, assistants, and media personnel. The Council met for four sessions in the fall each year and after much discussion, debate, dialogue and discernment closed on December 8, 1965. It produced sixteen documents. Remarkably, given that Thomas Aquinas was so central to official Catholic theological method in the 20th century, he is only mentioned in two places in the Council’s documents. And neither is found in the four conciliar Constitutions, which are considered to be theologically, the weightiest of the Council’s texts. Furthermore, in each case, the references are offered only in passing. In the Decree on Priestly Training (Optatam totius), Thomas is recommended as an aid to help seminarians penetrate more deeply the mysteries of salvation, once they have studied first the Eastern and Western patristic authors (OT, § 10). In the Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis), Thomas is mentioned as one of the illustrious teachers, among others, who has taught the Church the importance of the relationship between Faith and Reason (GE, § 10). Here it is worth noting that, unlike the Decree on Priestly Training, which recommends the study of Thomas, the Declaration on Christian Education only commends Thomas for what he has taught the Church. It does not explicitly urge the study of Aquinas. The question, therefore, is what happened to Thomas Aquinas at Vatican II?

Aquinas at Vatican II

Joseph Komonchak has written a very helpful article entitled: “Thomism and the Second Vatican Council” in which he indirectly addresses this question. The article opens with the following statement: “The history of the modern Neo-Thomism movement, whose magna carta was Aeterni Patris, reached its end at the Second Vatican Council.” This, Komonchak adds, “was not supposed to happen.” [6]

Two preparatory texts had been drafted between 1960 and 1962 for discussion at the Council that would have confirmed explicitly the preeminence of Aquinas for Catholic theology—one was on the formation of seminarians and the other was on sacred teaching. A third text was drafted On the Deposit of Faith by the Theological Commission, which did not explicitly endorse Aquinas, but did employ the method characteristic of modern Neo-Thomism. As Komonchak wrote, the early chapters of the text on the Deposit of Faith discussed the “basic epistemological and metaphysical principles, proofs for the existence of God, creation and evolution, and revelation and faith” that characterized the scholasticism found in the seminaries of the pre-Vatican II period. [7] In the mind of Luigi Ciappi, member of the commission that prepared the text, Vatican II would continue the teaching of the magisterium in recognizing Aquinas “as witness par excellence of the theological tradition… and safest exponent of the Church’s teaching.” [8]

Each of these three documents though would not fare well with members of the Council’s Central Commission during the Preparatory period, even before the Council opened. [9] With the text on the formation of seminarians, Cardinal Frings from Germany pointed out that other theological methods had developed and he could not understand why Aquinas’ teaching should be favored above others. Another German, Cardinal Döpfner, also recommended changes in order to include other theologians. Fr. Agostino Séptinski’s comments showed ecumenical and intercultural awareness. He wondered how the text would be received by Eastern Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Africans and Asians. The text on sacred teaching was also criticized for over-
exaggerating “the binding force of papal recommendations” by “omitting the qualifications the popes [themselves] had insisted on”. In this way it ran the risk of imposing “philosophy by decree” and greatly restricting the freedom of Catholic theologians.

The third text, on the Deposit of Faith, which had not spoken of Aquinas directly but instead reflected Neo-Thomism in style and content, was also criticized. Several members of the Central Commission argued that the text’s approach was almost exclusively philosophical; whereas an ecumenical council should use biblical and theological arguments. Equally problematic was that its style of philosophy was too narrow; it would be unconvincing to people trained in other schools and approaches to philosophy. [10]

The texts were sent to the Fathers in the summer of 1962, in various modified forms. The events of the first session of the Council are well-known, having been chronicled many times. In short though, in the opening weeks of Vatican II, the bishops from around the world took possession of the Council from the Roman curia and made it their own. They reconstituted the Conciliar working commissions, populating them with broader international representation. The Neo-Scholastic language and method that characterized many of preparatory schemata were rejected in favour of a more biblical, liturgical and patristic approach. Commenting on the significance of the change that occurred during this opening session in 1962, Giuseppe Ruggieri called it “a turning point that was decisive for the future of the Council… and for the future of the Catholic Church itself.” It was a turn “from the Church of Pius XII, which was still essentially hostile to modernity and in this respect the heir to the nineteenth-century restoration, to a Church that is a friend to all human beings, even children of modern society, its culture and its history… The turn was no sudden flowering, but something that had been long desired and awaited during the decades after World War I…” [11]

The text on the “Deposit of Faith” was never discussed by the Council Fathers. Some of its content would be reflected in the final documents of Vatican II, but not in the manner in which it had appeared initially. The text on the formation of seminarians, which had become “priestly formation” was discussed during the third session in 1964. Reflecting the views of many, it now “recommended a greater integration and harmony between philosophy and theology… with no special mention of St. Thomas.” It spoke of the Bible as “the soul of theology”, encouraged “study of the Fathers” and knowledge of the historical development of theology. Thomas was mentioned as assisting in the task of speculative theology. But the entire chapter on Aquinas that had appeared in the schema on sacred teaching was now omitted, which, as Komonchak notes, demonstrated “the diminishment of the role assigned to St. Thomas” at Vatican II. [12] In the Conciliar debate, those in favour of safeguarding Aquinas were a minority, but their voices were strong. Cardinal Ruffini argued that Aquinas was still “of great help in detecting and refuting new errors.” Archbishop Dino Staffa said that in order to defend the faith, the Church needed “the certain and objective validity of the fundamental principles of reason and philosophy.” The teaching of Thomas, he said, does not “deduce its conclusions from the always perfectible instruments and conclusions of science but borrows its principles from common experience from which, by right reason, it derives certain immutable metaphysical truths.” To the criticism that Aquinas represented Western thought and would not be meaningful to the Christian East, he replied “truth is independent of the area in which it is discovered and can be communicated everywhere else.” [13] In the end though, the majority prevailed and as mentioned earlier, only two small references to Aquinas survived the final redactions.

**Vatican II and Change in Theological Method**

The story of what happened to Aquinas at Vatican II is interesting. But it is important to see his disappearance as a result of broader changes both before and at the Council. In this last section, I would like briefly to identify some of them.

In reducing the presence of Aquinas at Vatican II, in the manner in which he had been presented officially in the preceding decades, the Council Fathers were unknowingly effecting theological method. I say “unknowingly” because there is no apparent evidence in the conciliar Acta that the bishops were aware of the impact their decisions would have methodologically.

The “Roman method” that prevailed in the century before Vatican II was a system, which
“stood or fell as a whole.” As Gabriel Daly describes it, “the system was made up of certain clearly defined philosophical foundations together with a systematic superstructure, the various elements of which were each seen as indispensable to the whole.” The purpose of the system was to “demonstrate and defend an objective order of divine facts and teachings” that any right-minded person could recognize as true. Many of the theologians teaching in the Roman schools of the time followed this system. In fact, they were, as Daly writes “convinced that this firm and methodological objectivation constituted the characteristic strength of Catholicism as contrasted with what they saw as the vacillations and unpredictabilities of Protestant subjectivism.”

The mode of communicating this system was the Roman manual—textbooks, written in Latin, which centralized and standardized the content as well as the manner in which the material was taught. These manuals determined the “character, quality, and particularly, the limitations of Catholic theology between the two Vatican Councils.” According to Daly, they “mapped out with precise and inflexible lines the terrain within which Catholic theology and philosophy were to be studied and taught.” [15] Theology was presented as objective, the method was deductive, and the argument was apologetical. There was no room for an appeal to subjectivity—experience, desire, affections, etc., and no recognition that the Church’s teachings were affected by historical development or change.

At another level in the Catholic Church though, beyond the Magisterium, things were indeed changing. The Catholic School of Theology at Tübingen in the first half of 19th century was promoting an organic understanding of tradition that was living, developing and unfolding. The so-called “Modernists” in the last decade of the 19th century / first decade of the 20th century were interested in the importance of subjectivity, human experience, and historical development. Against the Roman integralist method, Alfred Loisy, one of the most well-known of those associated with Modernism, wrote “the gospel did not enter the world as ‘an unconditioned absolute doctrine, summed up in a unique and steadfast truth, but as a living faith, concrete and complex’” that evolved in accordance with its surroundings. [16] At the same time, other movements and influences arose: the liturgical renewal movement in the mid-19th century; the biblical movement with its use of historical critical analysis of the Scriptures; the consolidation of Greek and Latin patristic literature by Jean-Paul Migne at the end of the 19th century, which allowed scholars to study the early Christian sources for the first time by consulting a single collection; the ecumenical movement in the early 20th century, which helped create an awareness of ecclesial diversity; the missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries; and the social movement starting with Bishop Von Ketteler of Germany who was concerned with the rights of people and with the deteriorating working conditions in Europe in the mid-19th century. The so-called “New Theologians” in the 1930s and 1940s, devoted themselves to a method called ressourcement—a return to the “sources”—through which they explored the sources of faith by studying the liturgy, the Bible and the patristic authors. In opposition to the Roman speculative approach that was interested almost exclusively in deduction, the New Theologians proceeded by way of both deduction and induction. Perhaps most importantly though was their emphasis on history. As Marcellino D’Ambrosio writes: for them “doing theology meant doing history.” [17]

When the Second Vatican Council opened in 1962, many of the preparatory documents, including the one on the Deposit of Faith mentioned earlier, followed the Roman manualist style. However, a great majority of the bishops present—especially those from Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands—were educated in non-Roman schools according the “New Theology.” During the first session, these bishops rejected the preparatory schemata and worked for the next three years to develop new texts more biblically rooted and pastoral in tone, reflective of more modern theological methods. Along with the rejection of the initial schemata went the predominant theological method employed within, of which modern neo-Thomism was central. In effect, the diminishment of Thomas almost to the point of disappearance at Vatican II was the result of the bishops opening the door to new ways of doing theology. It was not a rejection of everything Thomistic so much as it was a rejection of the system with which a particular form of Thomism was associated. Indeed, the influence of other 20th century forms of Thomism—like transcendentalism—can be found in the final texts of the Council.
In closing, I would say that Vatican II represented a liminal point for Catholic theological method. As Paul Murray wrote “the neoscholastic concern for the orderly presentation and defense of Catholic belief in Aristotelian categories... came under considerable strain” in the years before the Council. [18] Historical awareness moved into the center of theological reflection. “Liturgical, patristic and scriptural scholarship had served to give greater emphasis to the lived, ecclesial dimensions of faith and theology.” New forms of Thomism had emerged. These were among the forces that occasioned the Council’s ending of one system. They are also among those things influential in our critical reflection on approaches to doing theology today. As Murray notes, Catholic theology today is informed by “diverse other modes of theologizing, typically shaped by similarly close engagement with other significant streams in the broad expanse of Christian tradition and one or more of the natural and social sciences, the various contemporary modes of analysis operative in the humanities and the practices and understanding of other faith traditions and non-European cultural contexts.” Francis Schüssler Fiorenza would go a step further asking whether it is even possible today to speak of method. [19] In the decades since the Council, he writes, it has become “increasingly clear that the emphasis on method belongs to an academic and scientific approach to theology.” Theology today, he says, entails much more than method. “An adequate theological approach embraces diverse sources, diverse experiences and a plurality of criteria. It does not simply correlate contemporary questions with traditional answers or symbols.

In light of the expansion of method after the Council, influenced by forces and movements that began well before it, or even as Fiorenza suggests, of whether we can even still speak of method today, another interesting question would be: What might have happened to the Roman Catholic Church if Vatican II had upheld the magisterium's position on neo-Thomism? But this is another question for another time.

ENDNOTES


[14] Daly, “Roman Fundamental Theology,” 7


Andreas Widmer drew inspiration from his service as a Swiss Guard for Pope John Paul II to later become a successful business executive and author of *The Pope and the CEO* (2011). He has maintained a close relationship with the Vatican over the years and wrote an article in the *Huffington Post* after Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation. Widmer suggested that the mission of popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI was to implement the Second Vatican Council. That mission is now complete. [1] In an interview with the *National Catholic Register* Widmer wrote that the next mission and challenge for the papacy is to implement the New Evangelization. Responding to criticism of his *Huffington Post* article and the very idea of evangelization as potentially intolerant and unforgiving, Widmer said in his interview that the New Evangelization aims at both re-evangelizing cultural Catholics and evangelizing non-Catholics through “living out the Good News in one’s personal life, leading to a profound happiness and peace. This in turn will attract others to imitate us and join us in following Christ.” Other models of evangelization may lead to intolerance, but the path of witness that is the essence of Christian evangelization, old and new, leads instead to a “profound happiness and peace.” [2]

The argument of this article is that the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom, titled *Dignitatis humanae* (1965), is a strong support to Catholics and all people of good will in the implementation of the New Evangelization. *Dignitatis humanae* represents a major development within Catholic tradition that helps people live out their faith in the public square. It does this through its robust defense of the freedom of the Church and the freedom of the individual conscience. This two-fold defense of freedom assists in the building of a truly human (and at the same time, truly Christian) society. In order to show how *Dignitatis humanae* defends the freedom of the Church and the freedom of the individual conscience I will first situate historically the idea of the “freedom of the Church.” Due to events that have recently transpired in the U.S., I will use this background to evaluate major threats to freedom of conscience today, viewing the matter from my perspective as a U.S. citizen and as an educator. On the basis of two key principles found within *Dignitatis humanae* (the common good and subsidiarity), I will suggest how Catholics may understand more fully the nature of religious freedom and thus become more effective proponents of the New Evangelization.
Historical Background to the Freedom of the Church

There was once a controversy surrounding a great king. The concerns of the time were sex, conscience, and government. The place was England and the year 1534. Henry VIII had wanted an annulment of his marriage but it was turned down by Rome. In response, he determined that there should be no authority above his own. In 1534 the Act of Supremacy declared him head of the Church in England. For years he worked to bring over the higher clergy to his side with promises and intimidation. All of them yielded except one, Bishop John Fisher, and a layman named Thomas More. An oath of loyalty was imposed on the nation and these two men refused to take it. This was treason. The rights of conscience clashed with the will of the state, and the state prevailed. At his trial Thomas More appealed to his record of good service to the king but said that a “faithful subject is more bound in his conscience and his soul than anything else in all the world beside.” At his execution he declared that he died the king’s good servant but God’s first. [3]

Compare this to a tale of a controversy surrounding a certain American president. The concerns of the time were sex, conscience, and government. The place was the United States and the year 2012. The president had wanted to require that all employers except churches provide for contraceptives and abortion-inducing drugs in their health insurance plans. When Catholic leaders and others complained that this would violate their rights of conscience, he determined that the mandate of the government would stand firm. The Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate put government above conscience. The Catholic bishops, however, took a united stand in defense of the rights of conscience of all Americans.

The position of the American bishops in defense of the rights of conscience of all Americans is striking. They do not demand protection only for Catholic consciences. They do not demand government privileges for the Church. They take a stand for the conscience of all and for a strong, public presence of Catholics in this country. The thinking behind this clear stance of the Catholic bishops in America today was made possible by the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago, and particularly through Dignitatis humanae.

Dignitatis humanae was very controversial at the Second Vatican Council, as it has been ever since. Two movements have seen this document as a break with Catholic tradition, one traditionalist and the other progressivist. The traditionalist French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre went into schism from Rome, insisting that Dignitatis humanae was a rupture with tradition. He could not accept religious freedom. For hundreds of years Catholics thought that the best arrangement between Church and state was close alliance in which the state “recognized the truth of Catholicism and gave it a privileged place in society.” Some feared at the Council that embracing religious freedom would give endorsement to the radical secularizing politics stemming from the French Revolution which viewed religion as incompatible with a secular state. [4] Thus, the document’s defense of religious freedom seemed to them a rupture with tradition and could not be supported. On the other extreme the progressive movement has celebrated the supposed rupture because it seems to justify other changes in Church teaching. If Church teaching can change on religious freedom, why not on other issues? One finds this progressivist interpretation in, for example, John T. Noonan Jr.’s book A Church that Can and Cannot Change (2005). Both groups have adopted what Pope Benedict XVI called the “hermeneutic of discontinuity.” [5]

However, as Avery Cardinal Dulles and Ian Ker have argued, Dignitatis Humanae was clearly a development of Catholic tradition, not a break with it. True to John Henry Newman’s formulation of the development of doctrine, Dulles explained that while fundamental principles remain constant, the judgments and adaptions of them are ever new. [6]

Karol Wojtyła, acting as Archbishop of Kraków and later as the future Pope, vigorously defended the arguments of Dignitatis Humanae at the
Council. He viewed it very much in continuity with tradition, as did the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray (1904-1967). For Murray, the aftermath of the American Revolution was very different than that of the French Revolution. The experience of the Catholic Church in America was more positive than that of democracy in Continental Europe. Murray made the case that the Church thrived in America due to the separation of Church and state, and that the confessional state (one that was officially Catholic) should not be the Catholic ideal. [7] This American position was backed up at the Council by some Western European bishops who wanted to distance the Church from the old ideal of church-state alliances, and by many Eastern European bishops who had suffered state oppression under communism. [8]

Karol Wojtyła, who had been one of those bishops from Eastern Europe, argued strongly in favor of a statement on religious freedom at Vatican II. He approached the debate by focusing on the nature of the human person. George Weigel writes in his biography of Pope John Paul II that in Wojtyła’s intervention of the third session he argued that religious freedom touched the heart of the dialogue between the Church and the world. This was because religious freedom had to do with how the Church thought about the human person and the human condition. [9] Freedom was not a neutral faculty of choice. “Freedom...was freedom for, not simply freedom against. And what freedom was for was truth. It was only by living in the truth that the human person was set free.” Dignitatis humanae was adopted during the final session of the Council in 1965 incorporating Wojtyła’s arguments. The document would orient his approach to politics during his pontificate. The Church would primarily deal with the world not through politics but through culture, he thought. This was the birth of the New Evangelization.

Dignitatis humanae is not a negative document simply listing actions the state cannot do. Rather, it is a positive statement of the vital connection of religious freedom to the flourishing of our souls. It argues that religious freedom should be recognized as a civil right that is grounded in the dignity of the human person. “Religious freedom..., which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society.” It is a juridical principle not a philosophical one implying religious relativism. “Therefore,” the document continues, “it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.” (§ 1)

The document declares that in society the Church “should enjoy that full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires.” (§ 13) This is a sacred freedom because it comes directly from Christ. In Matthew 22:21 Christ commanded us to “render...unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” This was a revolutionary principle that has decisively changed the course of world history. In the ancient world from Rome to India, and from Egypt to Mesoamerica, religion and the state were closely identified. The state absorbed all of life into itself and was the final authority for the conscience of men. In one sentence Christ totally reoriented our view of politics. Politics is not the sphere where the deepest longings of our hearts can be met, nor is it the determiner of right and wrong. He separated the things of Caesar from the things of God. This created space for the freedom of conscience and a limit to political systems. [12]

This principle of Christ distinguishing between Caesar and God was not just an idea. It became embedded in history. This happened because Christ instituted a Church. The Church became a full-bodied institution with its own administration, legal system, scholarly language, universities, charitable institutions, courts, and wealth. The establishment of the freedom of the Church by Christ in history “required nothing less than a revolution in Western political life” involving the diminishment of the state and its role in human life. [13] The roots of modern Western liberty were forged in the medieval period in the clash of Church and state. [14] This is seen, for example, in the controversy that led to the Magna Carta of 1215, the first clause of which affirmed that “the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired...” [15] Nevertheless, during the medieval period, as Dante complained of in canto XVI of his Purgatorio, “the sword is joined to the crook,” and the two powers that should have been kept distinct have often became confused even within the Church itself. [16]

Despite medieval confusions, the freedom of the Church existed as historical fact. This did not mean that the old idea of the all-encompassing state
went away. During the Reformation and afterward, it came back in new forms. Henry VIII’s break with the Church, as in the story of the English Reformation that I told earlier, set the state above the religion of the nation. In this way it reinforced the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion). This meant that the prince would determine the religion of the people. This idea infected both Protestants and Catholics. For the next several hundred years the freedom of the Church would be greatly hampered by the rise of the modern states. As the work of British historian Michael Burleigh has shown, during and after the French Revolution of 1789 modern states have attempted to absorb the Church within them and even sought to replace it with a secular ideology such as nationalism or communism. [17] Despite secular attempts to limit the power of the state through constitutions and representative governments, the modern state has yet desired unchallenged rule of the world. The old ideal of the all-inclusive state is still with us.

Against this background, *Dignitatis humanae* represents a major development. For one thousand years the Church had existed in close relationship with the state. This was called “Christendom”—in which “Church and state formed a single body, internally differentiated by two authorities.” [18] Within Christendom the Church protected its freedom while expecting official state recognition. Church leaders were often both temporal and spiritual rulers—“bishop-princes.” For hundreds of years most Catholics thought of this arrangement, despite its inherent weaknesses, as normal and even ideal. As Edmund Burke remarked in 1775, “Everyone knows that the Roman Catholic religion is at least co-eval with most of the governments where it prevails; that it has generally gone hand in hand with them, and received great favor and every kind of support from authority.” [19]

However, *Dignitatis humanae* developed a new path. After two millennia over which the Church has witnessed all kinds of political regimes come and go, this document cultivated a spirit of detachment from the state. Philosopher of law Russell Hittinger points out that the Church “is in but not of the world.” It has had to “learn (or relearn) how to distance its affairs from the state.” [20] He argues that in *Dignitatis humanae* the freedom of the Church does not imply political hegemony in a “Christian state.” [21] I see this as being relevant because the political detachment of the document has important implications for the way we understand the New Evangelization, including the building of a human and Christian society, for example, in North Dakota, where I am from, or anywhere else for that matter.

**State and Conscience**

On January 20, 2012, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced a rule forcing private health care plans (except churches) to cover sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs, and contraception. In February of 2013, the Administration issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) regarding the HHS mandate. This document listed objections that had been raised to the HHS mandate and proposed some changes for public comment, such as expanding the definition of religious employers. [22] Catholic reaction in the U.S. has been mixed. In his comments on this NPRM, Timothy Cardinal Dolan reaffirmed his commitment to defend the religious freedom of all Americans, not just Catholics, and to uphold the official response of the US Catholic bishops in the document *United for Religious Freedom*. He also pointed out that certain gaps in the new NPRM still could require Catholic hospitals and universities to pay for contraception and that the conscience of individual business owners had no protection at all. [24]

In its March 14, 2012 statement *United for Religious Freedom* the US Catholic bishops called the threat of the HHS mandate “unprecedented.” They wrote that this issue “is not about the religious freedom of Catholics only, but also of those who recognize that their cherished beliefs may be next on the block. This is not about the Bishops’ somehow ‘banning contraception’… Indeed, this is not about the Church wanting to force anybody to do anything; it is instead about the federal government forcing the Church... to act against Church teachings. This is not a matter of opposition to universal health care, which has been a concern of the Bishops’ Conference since 1919...” [25]

In their 2012 document *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty*, the US bishops argue that religious freedom is the “first freedom” because if “our obligations and duties to God are impeded, or even worse, contradicted by the government,” then all
other freedoms are fragile. They even raise the possibility of civil disobedience in front of unjust laws. “An unjust law cannot be obeyed. In the face of an unjust law, an accommodation is not to be sought, especially by resorting to equivocal words and deceptive practices. If we face today the prospect of unjust laws, then Catholics in America, in solidarity with our fellow citizens, must have the courage not to obey them.” [26] In January 2013 Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli said that civil disobedience may be an effective way to combat the HHS mandate. [27]

How will all this play out? The signs of the times point to serious threats to religious freedom in the United States. The Church’s teachings on sexuality and marriage will increasingly invite persecution in the name of “equality.” The rights of conscience and religious freedom will be recast in terms of bigotry and intolerance. Standing for right and wrong will be seen as unsocial and a threat to sexual “freedom.” [28]

This means that we will need to renew our minds by grounding ourselves in reality and first principles. The importance of the individual conscience has a long history in the United States. John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail in 1775: “We have few Hopes, excepting that of preserving our Honour and our Consciences untainted and a free Constitution to our Country. Let me be sure of these, and amidst all my Weaknesses, I cannot be overcome. With these I can be happy, in extremum [sic.] Poverty, in humble Insignificance, nay I hope and believe, in Death: without them I should be miserable, with a Crown upon my Head, Millions in my Coffers, and a gaping, idolizing Multitude at my Feet.” [28] The spirited defense of conscience by the US bishops and others in the face of the HHS mandate raises many questions about what conscience and religious freedom are. *Dignitatis humanae* says that: “This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such ways that no one is to be forced to act against his conscience, nor kept from acting according to the conscience privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.” [29] (§ 2) Conscience and religious freedom are intimately connected. The document says that “the exercise of religion, of its very nature, consists before all else in those internal, voluntary and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind.” (§ 3) Conscience is one of the focal points of intimacy with God.

What is conscience? According the U.S. Conference of bishops, conscience is not whatever one wants it to be. It is not doing what one sincerely feels to be right. Rather, it is an act of the intellect judging the reality of a situation in light of moral truth. Conscience is an act of the intellect judging the goodness or badness of an action (past, present, or future). It is formed through (1) desire to embrace goodness and truth in Natural Law, Scripture, and Church teaching; (2) examination of the facts about various choices; and (3) prayerful reflection to discern the will of God. [30]

**Religious Freedom and the Common Good**

We must beware of interpreting religious freedom and conscience in individualistic terms. Classical liberal political thought has always been based on the idea of the autonomous individual. However, individualistic views of conscience and religion are completely alien to *Dignitatis humanae.*
and to Catholicism. The social nature of man requires us to view religious freedom from the perspective of the common good. This common good involves the good of the whole, whether of a nation or of an institution such as the Church, a business, or a family. This good of the whole necessarily requires the ability of each individual to participate in it. As Dignitatis Humanae says, the common good is the “entirety of those conditions of social life under which men enjoy the possibility of achieving their own perfection.” (§ 6) This means that religious freedom falls within the purview of the common good. This has significant implications for the state, the Church, and Catholic institutions.

The first way that religious freedom must be understood in light of the common good is that this freedom is justly limited by the state. The purpose of the state is to ensure the temporal common good. Dignitatis humanae is clear that citizens cannot use their own “rights of conscience” or “religious freedom” to abuse the rights of others. Nor can they disrupt genuine public peace using “religious freedom” as an excuse. The state has a duty to guard a just public order (§ 7) while at the same time protecting the true individual rights of conscience.

Furthermore, the state must not simply remain neutral toward religion. A flourishing religious life is part of the common good. The duty of the state is to help create conditions favorable to the religious life of the people. This does not mean the state must promote one religion over another. However, the state may choose to do this, as is currently the case in Malta (Catholic), Greece (Greek Orthodox), and England (Anglican). Nevertheless, in each of these cases it is still “imperative that the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom should be recognized and made effective in practice.” (§ 6)

To understand religious freedom in light of the common good through an alternative route requires one to recognize the true nature of the coercive authority of the Church. The state is responsible for the temporal good of its people (peace and prosperity). The spiritual good of the human person falls outside its jurisdiction, which is why Dignitatis humanae argues that the state cannot force the conscience of individuals. The Church has the primary responsibility for the spiritual good of people, and—shocking to our modern sensibilities—in this spiritual sphere coercion by the Church can be legitimate. Thomas Pink, professor of philosophy at King’s College London, remarks that, “The Church has jurisdiction over the baptized, who have an obligation of fidelity to the Church, to believe her doctrine and to obey her laws, including a duty to assist her mission when she requests it.” [31] Dignitatis humanae is specifically about the state’s inability to use coercion in religious matters; it is not about the Church’s inability to do so. This leaves intact an understanding of the Church as an independent institution with the ability to discipline the baptized who threaten the common spiritual good of the Church by heresy, apostasy, and schism.

Because the Church is a social institution, the religious liberty of her members cannot be understood in terms of liberal individualism. In this view, Catholic life and belief can be understood—wrongly—in democratic terms, as though the content of faith could be determined by a majority vote. The failure to support Church teaching is called dissent. [32] Yet many Catholics in the US (on both sides of the political divide) have been so deeply influenced by liberal political theory’s focus on the autonomous individual that they fail to see the gravity of dissent when they allow choice to trump doctrine. The Church, however, is not a democracy. In contrast to the individual-centered model of religious freedom, Pink writes about the jurisdictional-centered model of religious freedom within the Church. In this model, the religious freedom of the individual is not absolute. The Church has the responsibility to guard the spiritual common good through coercion if necessary, such as by excommunication or by banning books or certain practices. This is analogous to the state’s responsibility to guard the temporal common good through coercion if necessary, such as by police action.

This jurisdictional-centered model of religious freedom is actually more loving than the individualistic view. Pope Benedict XVI noted this when he said: “The use of the rod can actually be a service of love. Today we can see that it has nothing to do with love when conduct unworthy of the priestly life is tolerated. Nor does it have to do with love if heresy is allowed to spread and the faith twisted and chipped away, as if it were something that we ourselves had invented. As if it were no longer God’s gift, the precious pearl which we cannot let be taken from us.” [33]
The third way that religious freedom must be understood in light of the common good is that the social nature of human beings demands that they be able to live their faith in society. This does not mean creating a theocracy, which is clearly opposed to the Christian tradition. In their document *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty* the US bishops objected to both a “naked public square” stripped of religious believers and a “sacred public square” giving special privileges to religious citizens. They opposed these models and proposed a “civil public square” where all citizens can contribute to the common good. [34] Citizens should be able to give external expression to internal acts of religion—that is, live an integrated life (§ 3). Thus, religious freedom entails more than a private right. It requires a public right to live and work together in institutions and religious communities.

This is what is meant by the “Free Exercise clause” of the US Constitution. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof….” The free exercise of religion is strongly defended in *Dignitatis Humanae*. It means that the family has the right to live its domestic religious life freely under the direction of the parents. It means that religious communities freely have the right to choose their own ministers, teach in public, and practice charity toward others. Institutions freely have the right to govern themselves and pursue educational, cultural, charitable, and social purposes “under the impulse of their own religious sense.” (§ 4) This is true pluralism. In this way *Dignitatis Humanae* defends a robust civic culture.

The fourth way that religious freedom must be understood in light of the common good is through the organizational principle of subsidiarity. The principle of subsidiarity is implied by the idea of the common good. The common good involves the true good of each citizen. This true good must involve the ability of individuals and groups within the whole to better themselves through the exercise of responsibility. To have everything done for them by a higher level of government would necessarily entail a diminishment of their responsibility, and consequently of their humanity. The principle of subsidiarity states that it is unjust for a higher institution to take over the functions of a lower institution if that lower institution is capable of fulfilling them. [35] Thus, *Dignitatis Humanae* demands that religious communities be able to govern themselves so that they “may join together for the purpose of ordering their own lives in accordance with their religious principles.” (§ 4)

However, the freedom of institutions to govern themselves is not unlimited. The “just demands of public order” must be observed. Furthermore, “in spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one’s right and a violation of the right of others.” (§ 4)

**Toward a Human and Christian Society**

*Dignitatis humanae* helps Catholics bring their faith into society in the New Evangelization. What does it mean to bring faith into society? It is important to know *what is not meant*. Catholics are not trying to rebuild Christendom in which the Church has a privileged position. They are not trying to seize the reigns of political power so that they can force everyone to live according to the catechism. They are not working to create a sacred public square. They are not trying to construct a perfect kingdom of God on Earth—that attempt, whether secular or religious, has always resulted in violence and bloodshed.

According to the US Catholic bishops, Catholics desire a civil public square in which all citizens can participate, including religious citizens. Catholics seek to live out their faith in service to others. They seek to defend the freedom of others, even those who disagree with them. They are so confident in Christ and in the truth that if they faithfully witness to them they know that truth will speak for itself and attract others. The act of faith must be free so that God’s love can be received and responded to in a human way. Catholics are resolved to defend the freedom of others in their businesses, institutions, and society.

The second half of *Dignitatis humanae* examines the ways that Christ constantly respected the freedom of the people around Him. He refused to rule by force as a political Messiah. He witnessed to a kingdom not of this world. He was humble and tried to attract and invite others to Himself—not in-
timate or overawe them. He bore witness to the truth. He even "refused to impose the truth by force on those who spoke against it." (§ 11) He desired men and women to come to Him freely. Dignitatis humanae states that, "It is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man’s response to God in faith must be free; no one therefore is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will." (§10)

What does this look like as we live out our Christian lives in our institutions—businesses, government offices, schools? As a teacher I strive to respect the religious freedom of my students by trying to keep their dignity always before my mind. I refuse to coerce or manipulate them into simply accepting my views. I challenge them to question their books and their teachers—including me—by always asking themselves, "is this true?" While trying to present moral, political, or historical truths clearly to the students, I also protect the space they need to disagree with me. That space is important because it is only in freedom that they can make truth their own. As Dignitatis humanae notes, truth is powerful enough to impose itself by its own strength—it doesn’t need to be forced. Instead of scolding students for their mistakes, failures, or ignorance with moralistic dos and don’ts, I try to help them see for themselves where they are. I ask questions to draw them out, to elicit truth: "What do you mean by that?" "How did you arrive at that conclusion?" "Why didn’t you do your assigned reading?" Dignitatis humanae challenges us to respect and defend the freedom of others around us—even when they disagree with us.

Catholic leaders can promote religious freedom by refusing to privatize their faith and refusing to remain neutral in front of public religious and moral questions. They have a duty to promote the religious life of the members of their institutions, whether those members are Catholic or not. For example, major airports usually set aside space for a chapel where people of different faiths can go for prayer and reflection. We as Catholics can also do more. In our homes, we could set space aside for a small chapel as a "tithe" on the space with which God has blessed us. In our businesses, we could provide a beautiful place of prayer for employees before a busy day of work. We can also close our businesses on Sundays and Holy Days. A closed business is a real witness. It is a defense of the spiritual and domestic lives of employees and custom-

ers against material suffocation. All citizens have the duty to safeguard religious freedom in the nation, not just in relation to government, but also within institutions. As Catholics, we ought to defend ourselves not only against political threats, but against those cultural threats that attempt to swamp souls with materialism and selfishness. We ought to protect religious freedom by continually striving, with God’s grace, to grow in holiness and live out the faith we have received.

Catholics need to be aware of the lessons of history and of Dignitatis humanae so that they can act with wisdom in their present circumstances. During the English Reformation, Henry VIII closed even minor monasteries, those too small to be of any threat to his policies, and appropriated their wealth. In response, a popular resistance movement in northern England called the Pilgrimage of Grace arose. Through armed political demonstration, they demanded that Henry restore the Church and yield them more political representation. Henry made hasty promises and accommodations to buy more time. When the movement’s leaders had backed down, he went back on his word. The resistance movement failed partly due to the failure of Church leaders to back up the people who had risen in defense of the Church. Cuthbert Tunstall, friend of Thomas More and the most important bishop of the North, hid in a remote castle on the Scottish border until the turmoil was over. Henry, seeing he had nothing to fear from such Catholic leaders cowed by intimidation, went on to destroy the larger monasteries and even to execute a number of their abots. [36] In this way he subdued the Church to the state and denied the independent authority of the spiritual power.

Today—the hierarchy of the Church leads strongly. What will we, the laity, do?

ENDNOTES


Dignitatis Humanae


[12] Grasso, 225


[32] An example of this in an historian: “As a result of the Council, however, Catholics acquired the authority to dissent.” See Jay P. Dolan, The American Catholic Experience (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 426.


The week that I was working on this essay, I was also preparing to attend the third meeting of a formal interreligious dialogue between a small group of Catholics delegated by the Canadian bishops, and a similarly small group of scholars, priests and laypersons from various traditions of Hinduism. The dialogue is relatively new, and its results still far from certain. It follows, however, in a well-established line of such dialogues, with other Christians, with Jews, and with Muslims. As we collaborated with prominent leaders in the Hindu community of Toronto to form this group, there were many practical issues at the front of our attention: shared concerns about religious freedom in an increasingly secular Canadian society, shared interests in the education of youth, shared perplexities about the causes of religious violence at home and abroad. But we also brought questions about God, about the human vocation, about faith, about the spiritual life, and about the nature of religious community. Even in the short period we have been meeting, Hindu and Catholic members of the group have already begun inviting one another to deepen further our commitment to our own traditions, and to our mutual relationship.

It would be very difficult to imagine that this dialogue, or many of those more mature dialogues that have preceded it, would have been possible without the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and, in particular, its short document Nostra Aetate, “The Declaration on the Church’s Relation to non-Christian Religions” (1965). In his magisterial survey The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions, Jesuit scholar Gerald O’Collins identified the Council’s teaching on other religious paths as one area in which it is virtually incontestable that the Church executed a fundamental change in its self-understanding. This teaching, he concedes, “had some (partial) antecedents in theology and official teaching...but [it] went far beyond these antecedents to embody a massive shift in the official doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church.” [1] Such a “massive shift” cannot be confined to the text of Nostra Aetate. As O’Collins’ study well illustrates, very significant steps in this area were also taken in the documents on liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963), on the Church (Lumen Gentium, 1964), on mission (Ad Gentes, 1965) and on the Church in the modern world (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). This is particularly true with regard to the bishops’ teaching on the universality of grace and the possibility of salvation for those outside the Christian community, concerning which Nostra Aetate by itself has relatively little to say.

The specific contribution of Nostra Aetate...
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Parsing Nostra Aetate

was simultaneously more modest and, in its own way, more revolutionary. Rather than directly addressing questions of grace or salvation in other religious paths, it specified that specific “attitude” or “relation” (habitudo) that must be cultivated by Catholics toward these persons and their religious communities: an attitude not of confrontation or competition, but of dialogue and collaboration.

But this, too, is not all of one piece; for the drafting and implementation of Nostra Aetate reveals at least two different rationales for such dialogue and at least two trajectories that it can follow. Many of the controversies about this document, as well as the creativity it has generated in the life of the Church, can—in my view—be traced to a tension between these two trajectories. To illustrate this, I turn first to the history of the document’s drafting and implementation and then to a close reading of Nostra Aetate itself.

The Complex Development of Nostra Aetate

As we have approached the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, we have been gifted with ever richer documentation of the complex processes that produced its sixteen documents, including Nostra Aetate. In addition to standard references works, including Herbert Vorgrimler’s now classic Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II (1967-69) and Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak’s somewhat more contested History of Vatican II (1995-2006), we now possess more focused treatments by Miikka Ruokanen, Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, Elena Procario-Foley, John Connelly, Michael Attridge, and O’Collins, among many others. The story of the Declaration, as it emerges in these sources, is a vivid tale, full of drama and political intrigue. The first draft of a “Decree on the Jews” (Decretum de Iudaeis) was created during the preparatory period and submitted to the Central Preparatory Commission of the Second Vatican Council in early 1962, but it was withdrawn from consideration in June of the same year. It was presented to the Council Fathers for the first time in November 1963 as the fourth chapter of the draft schema on Christian ecumenism. It then went through at least three further drafts before being debated and accepted in principle by the Council Fathers in November 1964, adopted by the Council on 14-15 October 1965 and promulgated some two weeks later.

In its final form, Nostra Aetate includes five sections: two initial sections on the Church’s attitude to religions in general (§§ 1-2); a third section on Islam (§ 3); the fourth and longest section on Jews and Judaism (§ 4); and a final section condemning any form of religious discrimination (§ 5). Of these, only section § 4 can be traced to a definite point of origin in the preparatory period; for we know that, on September 18, 1960, Pope John XXIII submitted a request to Cardinal Augustin Bea to draft a document on the Church’s relation to the Jewish people. Various motives have been suggested for this papal initiative. No doubt Pope John's historic meeting with the French historian Jules Isaac (1877-1963) in June of the same year played a very significant role. Whatever the cause, one thing can be said for certain: Jewish-Catholic relations was part of the agenda of the Second Vatican Council well before the bishops gathered for their first meeting in the fall of 1962.

By contrast, the Church's relations with religious traditions beyond Christianity and Judaism, the specific subject of Nostra Aetate §§ 1-3, emerged only slowly, from the Council floor. Perhaps the most well-known aspect of this dramatic narrative was the organized opposition to the Declaration from those who expressed concerns that a document on the Jews without reference to Islam would render the Christians of Western Asia extremely vulnerable. But this was not the only argument behind the document’s enlargement. Paul Pulikkan has, for example, brought out the decisive role of a number of Indian bishops, who raised questions of interreligious dialogue in the preparatory period and in the earlier discussion of the schema on the Church. It was perhaps Fortunato Da Veiga Coutinho, the bishop of Belgaum, Karnata, who argued most forcefully for a Catholic engagement with what he called the “wider ecumenism,” an engagement which would bring to light the truths of Hinduism and other great traditions of the world.

No doubt, these interventions reflected a fair variety of motives and concerns on the parts of the bishops who made them. It is nevertheless clear that the question of the Church and other religious traditions, treated as a whole, emerged very differently than did that of the Church's relation to Jews and Judaism.

Further evidence of the relative independence of these two major units of Nostra Aetate can
also be found in the debates that led up to their eventual adoption by the Council. On the 20th of November 1964, for example, the draft Declaration was accepted in principle through three successive votes: one on sections §§ 1-3 as a block, a second on sections §§ 4-5 and a final vote on the document as a whole. At the final vote in 1965, moreover, the issues of greatest controversy were specifically different for each of these two major units. A document of the conservative coalition Coetus Internationalis Patrum, distributed on the 11th of October 1965, accepted most elements of § 4 with minor amendments, while severely criticising the “comparativist ideology” of §§ 1-3, pushing forcefully for their rejection on the grounds that it was “unworthy, not to say scandalous” to raise Hinduism and Buddhism to the same level as Christian faith. The strongest opposition to § 4, on the other hand, related to Nostra Aetate’s rejection of the idea that all Jewish people could be held responsible for the death of Jesus. It came both from conservatives, who objected to the apparent change in Church teaching on this point, and from progressives who wished for a more explicit disavowal of the curse of “Deicide”—as had appeared in earlier drafts of the document.

Arising as they did from different origins, it may perhaps come as no surprise that these two major units also bore rather different fruit. The Declaration calls for “dialogues” (colloquia) not once but twice: once at the conclusion of § 2 and a second time in the middle of § 4. One could not be faulted, therefore, for inferring that the bishops were imagining not one, but two different forms of dialogue, as attested by the creation of two entirely different Vatican bodies responsible for them. On the one hand, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, created under the aegis of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in 1966 and elevated to the status of a Commission in 1974, has enjoyed a focused mandate on particular issues specific to Jewish-Christian relations—exemplified most clearly in its 1998 reflection on Christian complicity in the Holocaust, entitled “We Remember.” On the other hand, the Secretariat for Non-Christians was instituted by Paul VI in 1964 and eventually renamed as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988. It has carried a far more diffuse mandate. In addition to issuing pastoral statements to recognize important events in Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other sacred calendars, it has also collaborated with other Vatican dicasteries, the World Council of Churches, and other partners to produce general guidelines and statements on particular questions relevant to any dialogue. Arguably, the most influential of these statements was issued in 1991 under the title “Dialogue and Proclamation.”

Two Distinct Theological Trajectories

At one level, of course, it is no surprise to discover that the Church’s relation to Judaism differs from the Church's relationship with other religious traditions. What is more interesting is that, once one recognises the clear distinction between Nostra Aetate §§ 1-3 and §§ 4-5, each major unit can then also be read as a reasonably coherent whole.

The older of these two theological trajectories in the history of composition is, ironically, the one that comes second in the order of presentation: namely, Nostra Aetate §§ 4-5. The Council Fathers begin this discussion not with any general reflections on dialogue or on religion, but with the specific history that joins Christians and Jews, reflecting on the spiritual link that unites the “people of the new covenant” with the “descendants of Abraham” (§ 4.1) and clearly recognising the roots of Christian faith and election in the Jewish patriarchs and prophets, the earliest apostles and above all Christ himself (§ 4.2-3). In the core of the section, the bishops state their fundamental conviction, drawn from the Apostle Paul, that “the Jews still remain very dear to God, whose gift and call are without regret” (§ 4.4). From this affirmation of Jewish particularity, the bishops look forward to a more universal future, when “all peoples will call upon the Lord with one voice” (§ 4.4). So also, after rejecting collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus and deploring anti-Semitism in all its forms (§ 4.6-7), the bishops conclude with a proclamation of “the cross of Christ as the sign of God's universal love and the source of all grace” (§ 4.8). In the Declaration's final section, such universal love is underscored by a condemnation of all forms of discrimination, against any person or religious group, as a stark contradiction of the Fatherhood of God (§ 5). The particular and specific, in this case, reveals and leads to the universal.

The trajectory of NA §§ 1-2, by contrast, largely inverts that of §§ 4-5. Whereas § 4 begins with the specific, historic emergence of Christianity from early Judaism, § 1 begins with an appeal to
the increasing communication between persons and nations in the contemporary era, as well as the desire for the Church to promote “unity and charity” and to seek what “human beings have in common” (§ 1.1). The bishops go on to describe what they will call the “deep religious sense” of humankind (§ 2.1), as demonstrated by the shared origin and destiny of all persons in God (§ 1.2), by the existential questions shared by all (§ 1.2) and by a brief phenomenological account of Hinduism, Buddhism and unspecified “other religions” (§ 2.1).

From this broad foundation, the bishops articulate yet another programmatic statement:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what it holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone . . . (§ 2.2).

In some contrast to the affirmation of God's irrevocable “gift and call” to the Jewish people in § 4.4, this important statement does not directly draw from the Christian scriptures… not, at least, until the bishops go on to insist that the Church must continue to preach “Christ who is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 14,6).” The section concludes, moreover, by a shift from the universal to the particular, encouraging Christians to enter into “dialogues and cooperation” with particular religious others and actively to preserve and promote “those spiritual and moral good things as well as the socio-cultural values” found among them (§ 2.3). In §3, finally, such a process of constructive engagement is specified and further illustrated with reference to Islam.

Importantly, these two theological trajectories overlap with one another on many points—not least, the bishops’ all-important preference for dialogue (rather than censure or condemnation) as the appropriate mode of engagement with religious others. Yet, the grounds for such dialogue, and its way of proceeding, would seem to be different in each case. One approach, perhaps most aptly symbolised by Paul VI’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land in January 1964, plunges deep into the heart of Christian faith to re-discover its own proclamation anew, and only subsequently draws conclusions from this re-examination, first for the Jews and then for all human beings. In the other, similarly symbolised by Paul VI’s travel to Bombay in December of the same year, dialogue proceeds from broader, more phenomenological convictions about the unity of all humankind, convictions which are only subsequently applied in practice and in diverse relationships with particular religious others. Though their conclusions may be similar, these two theological trajectories rest on specifically different sources and warrants, and each therefore shades the meaning of “dialogue” in distinctive, possibly conflicting ways.

Conclusion: Whither Dialogue?

Faced with these two rather different approaches to dialogue, many interpreters simply prioritize one over the other. In most cases, such a decision is practical: since one can only become an expert in a limited number of traditions and dialogues at any one time, it is expedient to emphasize only those sections of Nostra Aetate most relevant to engaging one’s particular dialogue partner(s) most effectively. Sometimes, however, such interpretative judgments become more systematic. Thus, in The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions, Miikka Ruokanen insists that, particularly if one treats it apart from later developments, Nostra Aetate should be regarded primarily as a statement on the Church’s relationship with Jews and Judaism. [2] That’s how it started, and that’s where it made its real contribution. O’Collins, with Ruokanen in mind, tacks in precisely the opposite direction, placing his strongest emphasis on the Council’s universalism and its new appreciation of the teachings and traditions of other religious paths.

But this, it seems to me, is ultimately a false choice. One distinguishes these two theological trajectories within Nostra Aetate not primarily in order to separate them or to prioritize one or the other, but to notice how they open up new imaginative possibilities by their mutual juxtaposition. Thus, reading the document from beginning to end, one becomes newly aware how Judaism and indeed Christianity itself can be placed firmly within a wider vision of shared questions, shared orientations, and shared values, alluded to in Nostra Aetate §§ 1-2. Phenomenologically, their adherents respond to many of the same fundamental concerns as Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and many others; descriptively, our rituals, practices, and ethics show great affinities with those prescribed in other religious paths. Conversely, by reading according to the historical development of Nostra
Aetate, one can use §§ 4-5 as a lens to understand the full significance of §§ 1-3. Judaism shares a unique relationship with Christianity, no doubt, but it also provides Christians with what the prominent theologian and ecumenist Gregory Baum described in the late 1960s as a primary analogy for understanding Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and other religious paths. Christians may thus be empowered to approach these traditions with new eyes and ears, listening for a word of God and divine promise no less particular and no less challenging to Christian faith than that given to the people Israel. By weaving the treatment of these religious paths together with a document on Jews and Judaism, Nostra Aetate may be read to invite its readers to consider each of them as, by analogy, bearers of a unique life and purpose in God’s divine plan—albeit a life and purpose that may emerge in its fullness only at the end of time.

What does this mean for me and for other Catholic members of our nascent Hindu-Catholic dialogue group? On the one hand, following the universalist trajectory of Nostra Aetate §§ 1-3, the document invites us not to diminish the full range of common, practical concerns that we may share with our Hindu sisters and brothers. Concerns about education and the formation of youth, questions of ethics, reflections on various forms of contemplative practice—these are widely shared, legitimate areas of enquiry, and we stand to gain enormously by dialogue and collaboration about them. At the same time, following the more particularist trajectory of Nostra Aetate §§ 4-5, the document opens the possibility that, in our Hindu partners, we may discover a partner like the Church also finds in historic Israel. That is, we may encounter insights and truths that arise, not only from our questions to God and to one another, but also from God’s questions and demands of us, as individuals and as religious communities. So we attend carefully to our dialogue partners, listening for their voices… as well as to the voice of the Lord that may well be revealed anew, in and through our shared dialogue.

Author’s note: except where noted, for the text of Nostra Aetate, I have followed the Latin text and English translation available in Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II (London and Washington, D.C.: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 968-71. I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague Yiftach Fehige for his insights into Nostra Aetate, which have deeply informed the argument of this essay.

ENDNOTES


“I wish I could write you a satisfactory letter on the subject of Confirmation...I will say what strikes me, but it will be difficult to come to the point in a page or two, and I am but partially informed on the subject.”


Confirmation, the cliché has it, is a “sacrament in search of a theology” – even a casual perusal of recent works on Catholic sacramental initiation reveals a dozen or more variations on that phrase. This despair of discovering the sacrament’s meaning, so foreign to the assured statements made by mediaeval theologians and the confident musings of post-Tridentine theologians into the twentieth century, only really took hold in the years following the Second Vatican Council. There are hopeful signs that the bewilderment has already begun to fade as a new generation of theologians sets its hand to the plough, recognizing that Confirmation is, rather, a sacrament with a few theologies, in search of integration.

My doctoral research has focused on the history of interpretations of the enigmatic sacrament. Catholic theologians have always found it challenging to identify what Confirmation does, what it adds to Baptism, but have historically risen to the challenge with varying degrees of success. The Middle Ages, for example, were a fruitful time for such speculation, producing rich scripturally-based insights that raised new questions in turn: Amalarius of Metz, Honorius of Autun and Praepostinus of Cremona identified Confirmation as the wedding garment of Matthew 22, without which one will not be admitted to the wedding feast. This interpretation, however, was not taken up by the other mediaeval theologians; instead, the majority of Scholastics proposed various permutations and combinations of four particular gifts mediated by Confirmation. They identified, as the chief effects of the sacrament: 1) strength (robur, in Latin) for preaching and witnessing, 2) strength for withstanding temptation, 3) strength for combatting the enemies of the
Church (not physically, but always spiritually and intellectually), and 4) growth (augmentum) or maturity in the faith. These models were always framed with reference to the Holy Spirit and Pentecost (Acts 2:1-18): they are presented as gifts or effects consequent upon a Pentecost-like outpouring of the Holy Spirit that transforms, equips and emboldens the Church so that it may witness to Christ.

Mediaeval theologies of Confirmation, in other words, were generally sophisticated and scripturally-informed meditations on the centrifugal impact of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Jesus’ disciples. The mediaevals also had a vivid sense that Baptism and Confirmation, even if separated by years, together formed an icon of the twofold gift of the Spirit in Scripture: Just as Christ breathed on the disciples to send the Holy Spirit among them (John 20:22-23), and again sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the mediaevals saw Confirmation as a second outpouring of the Spirit, given that Christians might bring Christ to the world and persevere despite that world’s hostility. They were not troubled (as more recent critics of the Catholic doctrine of Confirmation have sometimes been) by any fear that positing a gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation requires one to deny a gift of the Spirit in Baptism: for the mediaevals, it was unthinkable to suppose that the Holy Spirit was not given at Baptism, so they simply posited multiple gifts of the Spirit. The Spirit is poured out at Baptism and at Confirmation. The Spirit blows where it wills, and can be received as often as God wills.

The theological energy of discussions of Confirmation in the Middle Ages settled down somewhat following two interventions of the magisterium. The Councils of Florence (1439) and Trent (1545-1563) defined two key reference points for Catholic theology, namely that Confirmation is one of the seven distinct sacraments, and that it imparts an enduring quality, a “character” that makes it as unrepeatable as Baptism or Holy Orders. Following Trent, the theology of Confirmation tended to remained stable and uniform for several centuries: most theologians of the Tridentine period who enquired about Confirmation, such as Bellarmine and Liguori, were content to cite certain Fathers of the Church and the Council of Trent to establish the sacrament’s matter, form, minister, and effects. With help especially from Tertullian, St Cyril of Jerusalem, St John Chrysostom and St Ambrose, the post-Tridentine theologians were confident that Confirmation was conferred by a bishop (or, exceptionally, by a duly-delegated priest), using an anointing with chrism accompanied by a hand-laying and a particular verbal formula (namely “I sign you with the sign of the cross, I confirm you with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen”), for the purpose of bestowing the Holy Spirit unto greater audacity and robur. That robur allowed the baptized Christian to take her place as a fully mature, adult member of the Church—regardless of actual age—because it allowed her to confess Christ and resist temptation and withstand persecution coram mundi, before the world and its rulers.

With Matthias Scheeben in the 19th century came the first stirrings of modern dissatisfaction with the received theology of Confirmation. Dissatisfaction must not be read here as rebellion or rejection; rather, while judiciously embracing everything that could be embraced in the patristic and mediaeval theologies of Confirmation, Scheeben and many who came after him were preoccupied with the puzzles those theologies raised. If Confirmation makes one a fully-equipped Christian, what is the status of Roman Catholics, baptized in infancy but only confirmed in adolescence, during the interval between sacraments? What is sacramental “character,” that quality whereby Confirmation (like Baptism and Holy Orders) is considered intrinsically unrepeatable? What does Confirmation do that Baptism does not—assuming it must have some distinct purpose to warrant its existence as a distinct sacrament?

Catholic theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not doubt the apostolic origins and sacramentality of Confirmation, despite the changes which the rite had undergone. They were aware that the Fathers of the first two centuries prior to Tertullian made no reference to a second sacrament of initiation; they were aware also that the separation of Confirmation from Baptism—such a striking point of divergence from the Eastern Christian practice of conferring Baptism, Chrismation and first Eucharist in one ceremony, often in infancy—was originally a purely pragmatic quirk of Western history, not a deeply-rooted theological option. In the early Church, bishops were the original ministers of the sacraments of initiation; as the growth and expansion of the Church made it less feasible for bishops to celebrate person-
ally every initiation, the East opted to retain episcopal involvement by using episcopally-consecrated chrism for the post-baptismal anointing, whereas the West opted to postpone that anointing in the case of infants baptized by presbyters, until such time as the bishop could personally complete their initiation. This naturally led to longer and longer delays between Baptism and Confirmation as dioceses grew, and episcopal visits became less frequent. In other words, the prevailing Roman Catholic practice of delaying Confirmation until adolescence originated not with an instinct that Confirmation is especially proper to adolescence, but with a sense that it is especially proper to the bishop’s ministry – an instinct so strong that it was felt preferable to delay the sacrament by many years if necessary in order that every Christian might have the opportunity to be confirmed by the bishop’s hand. At any rate, there was no movement among the theologians of 1850 to 1950 to call the sacrament of Confirmation into question, though many urged changes to the pastoral practice of Confirmation; they chiefly sought, rather, to understand better why a second gift of the Spirit, echoing the twofold gift to the Apostles, should be part of the sacramental economy, and to revise Christian initiation practice to reflect the primacy of Baptism and the Pentecostal meaning of Confirmation.

The most compelling rationale for a great many Catholic theologians of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century was that Confirmation empowered or commissioned layfolk to do their part in the building up of the Kingdom of God; it was sometimes called the sacrament of Catholic Action, or of the lay apostolate. This view was shared, for instance, by Matthias Laros, Bernard Leeming, and Francisco Solá. Another school of thought focused instead on the close connection between Baptism and Confirmation, and interpreted the latter as a plenitude or fuller development of the former. Examples of this point of view can be seen in the works of Dix andCatholic theologians of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s shared one important assumption: their methodology depended heavily on an intimate acquaintance with the Fathers, and a careful study of the evolution of Christian liturgy. Dix had delivered an immensely influential little lecture on Confirmation in 1946, published as The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism (Dacre, 1946), in which he advocated a very robust account of Confirmation as the sacrament that conferred the Holy Spirit; Lampe replied with a long and detailed study of the patristic era, The Seal of the Spirit (Longmans, 1951; 2nd ed., 1967) in which he argued that the only “seal of the Spirit” known to the early Church was that of Baptism.

One might have expected Catholic theologians of the time to side with Dix – the advocate of a strongly sacramental view of Confirmation – but while his patristic and liturgical erudition contributed immensely to the sophistication of the discussion, most contemporary Catholic authors considered Dix erred when he denied to Baptism the functions he ascribed to Confirmation. As reverent as he was of the Fathers, Dix was nonetheless prone to caricaturing and dismissing mediaeval theologies of Confirmation as though they were a colossal series of misunderstandings, a tendency that made it very difficult for Catholics to embrace him as an ally. (Dix was one of first advocates of a facile perspective on the Middle Ages that can still be found today, even among Catholic theologians: he noted that the Confirmation doctrine ascribed to a Pope “Melchiades” in the Pseudo-Isidorean Decretals came to have great influence on mediaeval theology on the strength of its ostensible papal provenance. The passages in question, however, came not from a Pope, but from the fifth-century bishop Faustus of Riez. This much is not disputed. However, Dix was one of the first to exaggerate the importance and magnitude of this misattribution. A study of the mediaevals reveals that they relied on many sources, including the Scriptures, for their diverse and quite nuanced Confirmation doctrine, but one still reads variations on Dix’s caricatural oversimplification among those who ought to know better). However, despite this disagreement, Dix, Lampe and the Roman Catholic theologians of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s shared one important assumption: their methodology depended heavily on an intimate acquaintance with the Fathers, and a careful study of the evolution of Christian liturgy.
When the Second Vatican Council was convoked, Catholic theologies of Confirmation tended thus to focus on two themes, sometimes with a certain amount of tension between them: the lay vocation to transform the world according to the Gospel, and the close connection among the sacraments of initiation. These themes appear quite vividly in the documents of the Second Vatican Council; for instance, in Apostolicam Actuositatem (the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People), we read:

Lay people’s right and duty to be apostles derives from their union with Christ their head. Inserted as they are in the mystical body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate (paragraph 13, Flannery edition).

And in Sacrosanctum Concilium (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), the Council Fathers urged that “the rite of confirmation is to be revised...so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation may be shown more clearly” (paragraph 70). In other words, on the subject of Confirmation, the teaching of the Council reflects the predominant concerns among theologians at the time: it expresses the state of considered and even settled opinion, rather than pointing the way to some new approach, or imposing a novel framework from without on the theological discussion then taking place.

The Council’s vision was only partly fulfilled in the years after it closed. The rite of Confirmation was indeed revised in 1971 by Pope Paul VI’s Apostolic Constitution Divinae Consortium Naturae [DCN]; not only did it seek to affirm more clearly the links among the sacraments of initiation by ensuring that, in the case of adult catechumens, all three sacraments be conferred in the same rite, but it attempted a rapprochement with the East by instituting a new formula of Confirmation. After DCN, the formula for Confirmation in the Latin Church became “Receive the seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit,” which is similar to the Byzantine formula. However, since the Latin rite does not also include the epiclesis (the invocation of the Holy Spirit) that is so crucial to the Byzantine rite of chrismation, its ecumenical value has been criticized.

Another shift in focus that one can find in theologies of Confirmation after the Council is a more robust turn to the Scriptures and especially to the Holy Spirit in Scripture. This sensitivity was not absent from theologies before the Council, but there is a notable turn to the Scriptures among some post-conciliar authors of Confirmation theology (e.g. Austin Milner, Louis Ligier, Gérard-Henry Baudry and of course Yves Congar). The charismatic renewal has made Catholics further aware of pneumatology, yet this has not often been explicitly tied to a renewed understanding of Confirmation except in the form of a puzzle: if Catholics receive the Holy Spirit at Confirmation as a sort of personal Pentecost, what is the meaning of the Pentecostal charisms that defined the charismatic renewal?

Alongside this ressourcement, however, one also notes a disturbing trend among some post-conciliar Catholic authors to eschew sacramental realism and to posit a thoroughly naturalized vision of Confirmation. For some of these authors, Confirmation begins and ends as a human act of celebration and ratification; it is at best a prayer for the Holy Spirit, though it often fails to reach even that modest height; for these authors, it is certainly not a covenanted gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying of priestly hands and anointing with apostolically-consecrated chrism. Bausch, for instance—popularizer of the “sacrament in search of a theology” meme—writes merely that “confirmation celebrates the baptismal experience, or at least the public, conscious proclamation of the Spirit” (A New Look at the Sacraments, Twenty-Third Publications, 1983, p. 120). Michael Lawler provides another example of this impoverished view of the sacraments; he writes that

there comes a time when believers will wish to proclaim in some solemn way the presence of the Spirit of God within them, both to themselves and to the Church in which they have learned faith. That is the time for confirmation, the solemn ritual in the Christian Church for revealing, realizing and celebrating the presence of the Spirit of God in baptized believers (Symbol and Sacrament, Paulist Press, 1987, p. 99).
A third example comes from the late Aidan Kavanagh, a Benedictine liturgical theologian. Kavanagh devoted most of his book *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (Pueblo, 1988) to defending the hypothesis that an early liturgical account often cited as a description of a primitive rite of Confirmation—namely, the baptismal accounts in the work from about 215 called *Apostolic Tradition* [*AT*]—was nothing like Confirmation at all, but was instead a liturgical rite of dismissal. Kavanagh’s hypothesis has not been widely accepted but, more to the point, his approach reveals a problematical liturgical historicism that has been influential in the post-conciliar years. Kavanagh argued that, since (on his account) the rite in *AT* did not concern the Holy Spirit at all, and since (still on his account) the Roman Church’s practice of Confirmation derives from that rite in *AT*, the Church today should not understand Confirmation as a rite that bestows the Holy Spirit. In effect, Kavanagh’s approach confers magisterial status on the primitive liturgy and allows it to trump any other consideration. His highly speculative shift in the reading of one document is allowed to erase all of the scriptural and theological considerations that have subtended the Church’s doctrine and practice of Confirmation in the subsequent eighteen centuries.

Thankfully, some of the naturalizing tendencies of Catholic theology following the Council appear to be abating and more recent treatments of Confirmation, like the wise householder, show an aptitude for drawing from their storehouses treasures both old and new. These treatments manifest a robust sacramental realism, a serious engagement with mediaeval theology, an acknowledgement of the concerns raised by liturgical and patristic scholarship, and a prayerful engagement with Scripture. I particularly wish to highlight the fine work of a number of Dominicans like the late Colman O’Neill, his student Romanus Cessario, and Benedikt Mohelník.

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**A THANKSGIVING**

*LORD*, in this dust Thy sovereign voice 
First quicken’d love divine;
I am all Thine,—Thy care and choice, 
My very praise is Thine.

I praise Thee, while Thy providence 
In childhood frail I trace,
For blessings given, ere dawning sense
Could seek or scan Thy grace;

Blessings in boyhood’s marvelling hour, 
Bright dreams, and fancyings strange;
Blessings, when reason’s awful power
Gave thought a bolder range; {46}

Blessings of friends, which to my door
Unask’d, unhoped, have come;
And, choicer still, a countless store
Of eager smiles at home.

Yet, Lord, in memory’s fondest place
I shrine those seasons sad,
When, looking up, I saw Thy face
In kind austereness clad.

I would not miss one sigh or tear,
Heart-pang, or throbbing brow;
Sweet was the chastisement severe,
And sweet its memory now.

Yes! let the fragrant scars abide,
Love-tokens in Thy stead,
Faint shadows of the spear-pierced side
And thorn-encompass’d head.

And such Thy tender force be still,
When self would swerve or stray,
Shaping to truth the froward will
Along Thy narrow way.

Deny me wealth; far, far remove
The lure of power or name;
Hope thrives in straits, in weakness love,
And faith in this world’s shame.

*John Henry Newman (1801-1890)*
Before examining certain concrete questions that are of particular concern to the modern mind, I would like first of all to establish the basic principles underlying any such discussion. First of all, the essential point to be made and from which all others flow is this: The Church is a divine society—divine in its founder and in its original and actual Head, divine in its doctrine, in its law and in its structure. From this principle flow others which need some explanation. In the first place the characteristic which, above all, distinguishes the Church from human societies is that membership in it is a privilege and a free gift. Contrary to the presuppositions of our social milieu, it is nevertheless true that one is not born in the Church. Rather, membership in this society comes as a second birth which is the result of divine grace instead of human free will. Even if one’s entrance into the Church is basically the result of the gratuitous initiative of the Saviour Himself, it still remains true that, for this initiative to produce the desired results, it must be accepted freely by the man who is its beneficiary.

If this is true, then one does not enter the Church to keep one’s freedom, but to receive thereby the life of the Saviour Himself, or as the rite of Christian Baptism teaches, to die to self in order to live in Christ. The first impulse of the Christian who truly belongs to the Church is one of total commitment of his whole being, including his intellect, to the Truth, which is Christ. In such a position, to feel uneasy about one’s freedom, because one is within the Church, is in essence, to question Christ Himself, Who tells us that He is the Truth and that the Truth shall make us free.

A second mark of the Church is the perfect and sovereign character of this spiritual society. Even if it does, as indeed it should, receive some civil status from the political authority of those countries in which it becomes incarnate, nevertheless the Church does not rely on that political authority either for its existence or its activity.

Another distinctive trait of the Church is that she is hierarchical, which means that she is a divine society not only founded but, here and now, directed by her Head, Christ Himself. It is true that to assure perfect compatibility between this society which He founded and which He continues to direct (on the one hand), and mankind for whom it was destined (on the other), the Saviour willed to give it a totally human vesture. In this regard He
willed to put this visible Church under the leadership of men possessing an apostolic mandate, i.e., men consecrated by Himself, by the apostles and by their successors for the purpose of ruling the Church. To these men He entrusted the keeping of its doctrine, its sacramental life, and its apostolic mission. Just as, in the structure of the Church, the fundamental principle of its hierarchical character is evident and indisputable, so also does it appear in the direction of the church, in the indissoluble unity between the invisible element which is Christ and the visible element which is the Pope and the bishops.

These then are the bases for any discussion of the liberty of the laity in the church. On one side, we have to keep in mind an objective reality established by God Himself. This consists of the Church itself in her doctrine, life, essential structure, and hierarchical character. On the other hand, we must bear in mind a subjective reality, which is the important part left to human initiative in the construction and activity of the Church throughout the ages. The visible heads of the Church, as well as their subjects, must keep both these realities, objective and subjective, in mind.

There remains to examine the specific conditions of authentic liberty within the Church. In other words, to what kind of relations between those in authority and their subjects do the above principles lead in practice? What margin of responsibility is left, in everyday life, to the individual Church member? What special difficulties arise within this spiritual society? What specific applications of the principles are problematic?

Independently of the principles just stated, a great number of men, scrutinizing the life and activity of the church are convinced of the basic incompatibility between liberty—which contemporary men hold so dear—and that life and activity. Hence, it is my intention to touch upon some of the specific problems involving the relationship between authority and liberty in the Church.

I. IS THERE A PLACE IN THE CHURCH FOR CREATIVE RESEARCH AND FREE DISCUSSION OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT?

There is in the Church a body of doctrine whose essential elements were revealed by Christ, and whose keeping has been entrusted to the hierarchy; from these facts some conclude that there is no place in the Church for creative research and for individual thinking in strictly religious matters. That this is the case, they say, is attested to by the fact that the Church herself affirms that nothing will ever be added to this deposit of faith.

**Christian Doctrine Undergoes Continuous Growth**

To think thus is to forget that the doctrinal content of Christianity, in contrast to the teaching of Mohammed, is not a series of infinitely detailed rules of belief to be reasoned by vote once and for all, so that they can be recited indefinitely without change of a dot or a comma. Rather, like everything that pertains to the Church, Christian doctrine is part of a living organism that undergoes continuous growth though the centuries as the Church achieves deepening insight into the essential mysteries of the faith. Newman has described the essential laws of this growth in his unforgettable Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine.

The Christian dogmas, actually defined, establish the basic structure of this doctrine: To these dogmas, all, popes, bishops, priests and laymen are equally obliged to adhere. It should be pointed out, in passing that very few of the dogmas presently recognized by the Church were defined from the beginning but rather were contained in essence in the deposit of faith and in early Christian tradition. It is only throughout the course of the centuries, following discussions, exchanges of all kinds, and difficulties arising in some particular Church or other, that Rome, on the occasion of councils and in pontifical declarations, gradually defined particular points of doctrine now accepted in the Catholic Church. It could even be affirmed that within the boundaries of the dogmas now recognized explicitly, there exists an infinity of points not yet settled in a definite manner. Each epoch gives rise in this matter to new problems which permit or necessitate new explanations of doctrines. Our own era, for instance, has given rise to a great number of as yet unsolved problems: the meaning of many passages of scripture, the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of redemption, the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in salvific activity, the respective roles of the bishops, priests, and laymen within the Church, the relations between Church and State, the mysteries of time and of history. We must recognize as did Newman, “that, after all, the area of religious thought
The spiritual life of the laity should take its particular character from their married or family state or their single or widowed state, from their state of health, and from their professional and social activity. They should not cease to develop earnestly the qualities and talents bestowed on them in accord with these conditions of life, and they should make use of the gifts which they have received from the Holy Spirit. [...] They should also hold in high esteem professional skill, family and civic spirit, and the virtues relating to social customs, namely, honesty, justice, sincerity, kindness, and courage, without which no true Christian life can exist.”

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 1965
II. Has the Layman the Right to Discuss Publicly Certain Weaknesses of the Church?

The problem raised by the preceding question leads us to ask a related one, viz., to what extent does the layman have a right to discuss and criticize publicly certain weaknesses pertaining to the interior life of the Church? For example, has the layman the right to discuss publicly certain weaknesses of current preaching, certain deficiencies in the system of religious instruction and spiritual formation within the schools, certain lacunae in the system of the formation of religious in seminaries, certain differences which might exist between bishops, certain questionable decisions on the part of Church authorities, etc.? I shall limit myself here, following the pattern I established at the outset, to the examination of this problem solely in relation to matters touching upon the interior life of the Church. I therefore purposely rescind, for the moment, from all discussion of any matter concerning the Church's intervention in the temporal sphere. Here then are the main points which this currently pressing problem prompts me to make.

Silence to be Deplored

Let us make it clear first of all that we must reject, as insufficient and as out of accord with the prevailing feelings of contemporary man, the attitude of those who, when confronted with a weakness in the Church see no other possible course of action for the faithful than to make their views and suggestions known to a competent authority, and then to keep silent. To demand such an attitude on principle is to limit seriously the right of the layman to express his opinion; it is also tantamount to overlooking the fact that religious authorities, like all human authorities, in order to govern the Church, will need to draw strength from a vigorous and demanding voice of public opinion. In the case of a flaw which affects the Christian community, it is normal and highly desirable that those in authority be, first of all, frankly and directly informed of the reactions and opinions of their subjects. It is also desirable, especially when it is a question of problems whose solutions cannot be a long-term affair that extended discussions, open to all ranks of the community, take place. In the course of such discussions various schools of thought would no doubt be formed regarding the matters in question. Some people tend to regard such developments as an unmitigated evil and weakness. For my part, I consider it above all as an enrichment of the Church, as a sign of the great diversity possible within the Church, and especially, as a sign of spiritual vitality.

Danger of Scandal

Others, confronted with such discussions, would think mainly of the scandal that might accompany excessively violent dispute in the domain of religion. And such danger is real. It can be considered under two aspects.

There is first of all, the danger that such discussions become a source of scandal for many members of the Catholic community. In this regard, I believe each Catholic must have a deep respect for the faith of his fellow Catholics. Each will have to answer before God for any scandal he may have caused. But, on the other hand, the faith of Catholics often tends to become somnolent, especially in areas where the Catholic religion is a predominant sociological fact as well as a spiritual reality. Some shock treatment is then necessary to revitalize it. However, we must not confuse those who of necessity play the part of pioneers in the Church with other malicious critics who have no other purpose than to destroy the faith of believers. Tone is very important in this matter. Bitter and exaggerated criticism almost always does more harm than good. A sincere Catholic publicly discussing some flaw of the Church, must also manifest profound regret and real anxiety. He must keep, as the Gospel warns us, a feeling of deep pity and profound spiritual sympathy for all who might be implicated in the weakness he is discussing.

Secondly, there is the further danger of scandalizing those who are outside the church but who feel drawn by her unity. Our differences, if made too much of in the public eye, may lead to discouragement, driving such people away from the Church. But here, as well, there are two aspects to the question. It is true that discussions between Catholics conducted without charity or about petty differences are the type that scandalize and alienate people who otherwise would move nearer the Church. But the reverse is also true. Realistic and vigorous discussion among Catholics conducted calmly, charitably, and on an intelligent level, will...
often create among non-Catholics a surprising impression of vigour and youth as enjoyed by the Catholic community.

One day, for instance, I was invited to address a group of Protestant students at the University of Toronto. After much hesitation, I decided to show these students, with complete frankness, the various choices with which the Catholics of Quebec were struggling at that time. I told them of certain differences which were beginning to develop among us. When afterwards, I voiced my fear to some members of the audience that I might have scandalized them with the bluntness of my descriptions, they told me: “Don’t worry, you have edified rather than shocked us. All this discussion which is going on among you is proof of the great vitality in your spiritual community. We would like to have such debates ourselves. It is too bad, however—we neither see nor hear of any activity; this is a spiritual desert…”

Tact and Intellectual Discernment Necessary

Whatever the intentions and necessity prof­fered by those who think it their duty to criticize publicly some facet of the interior life of the Church, we have the right to expect from those who take the risk of exercising this liberty the intellectual honesty and emotional stability that is normally demanded of them in their own professional circles. I am astounded, when reading or hearing what is written and said about the Church these days, by the serious lack of precise thinking, by the high percentage of emotionally charged accusations, by the frequency of biased, incomplete or inaccurate information with which some minds, usually very rigorous and intellectually honest in their own fields, are content when it comes to discussing the Church and questions of religion. Some of these people think that they show courage and intellectual originality if they shout out loud and use emotionally charged phrases when treating of religious problems. All they succeed in doing, usually, is to show on what fragile foundations they base their information and religious culture. Of all fields of discussion, none requires more tact, more subtlety and more intellectual discernment than that of religion.

In a Spirit of Love

Finally, it is not so much a matter of disciplinary rules as of an underlying spirit which provides the answer to the question under scrutiny here. Whoever possesses this spirit discovers and understands on his own the necessity for certain disciplinary rules. Whoever does not possess that spirit, but believes his position to be correct simply because he observes certain purely formal regulations for expediency’s sake, risks doing considerable harm to the Church by giving free rein to his talent for criticism. “All discussion,” wrote Cardinal Lercaro, some two years ago, “to be truly ecclesial (i.e. within the spirit of the Church), must be conducted in a spirit of unshakable love for truth, of charity, and of tolerance, and in generous respect for justice.” (Documentation Catholique, June 7th, 1959, col. 738) “Truth,” said Pius XII to the American newspapermen in 1946, “is outside of passion; it is not partisan, is not mercenary, needs not fear to be known; it also knows, as necessity demands, how to be discreet.” (Documentation Catholique, June 7th, 1959, col. 739).

III. Conclusion

It seems evident to me—as the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner very pertinently points out in a recent article on public opinion within the Church—that the Church is now in a period of transition wherein certain ways of exercising and vindicating the powers of authority no longer are as useful and efficacious as before. Great patience is needed on all sides in an attempt to redefine the exercise of authority and liberty in a manner which will conform both to the essential and immutable principles of the Church and in a manner acceptable to the contemporary mind.

To devote himself to this task with some hope of success, the Christian layman must work within certain limits. For instance, he will have to deepen his religious culture to the same extent as is secular culture. He will have to deepen the content of his faith, discovering the theological implications of dogmas he hitherto accepted without scrutiny or discussion: he must study the history of the Church, canon law, and all the various disciplines which will bring him an understanding of the originality and riches of the mystery of the Church.

He will have to share, in proportion as the Church urges him to, in the apostolic responsibility which is the primary and essential characteristic of the Church of Christ. It is in the crucible of apostolic experience that the layman will plumb most effectively the depths of the mystery which is the Church. ■

Abridged version
In an eloquent exposition of the principles undergirding what is sometimes called “the Cambridge school of ideas,” Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that when examining the texts of some scholar, a crucial question is always: Against whom is he writing here? Within what controversy is this or that particular contention to be situated? Scholars “characteristically invite us not simply to assert p, but to assert p rather than q or r, and we will often only understand the point of asserting p, if we know what q and r are.”[1] Reading Ratzinger is no exception.

**The Response to Luther**

In his early work the young Professor was clearly contending with the unfinished business of the Council of Trent. His exposure to mid twentieth-century Lutheran scholarship helped to raise his awareness of the inadequacies of the Counter-Reformation theology or what Marie-Dominique Chenu was to call “baroque theology.” Although the style of Ratzinger’s papacy was often labelled “baroque” because he wore baroque-style vestments and other pre-modern items of papal regalia, and indeed while the very word “baroque” conjures images of the white wedding cake churches that dot the Bavarian countryside, his theology was anything but baroque.

His earliest interests were in ecclesiology and in the relationship between scripture, revelation and tradition. His heroes were not the baroque scholastics Cano, Cajetan and Suárez but St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, and Newman. In plundering these resources he was responding to issues thrown up by scholars such as the Lutheran Oscar Cullmann and the Catholic Josef Geiselmann whose area of study was the treatment of tradition at the Council of Trent. Although the role of tradition in the economy of salvation was one of the most hotly contested issues of the Reformation, the Tridentine decree which addressed the subject failed to define what the Counter-Reformers understood by the concept “tradition.” In contrast, the Lutherans produced volumes on the subject.
In his address at the Augustinian Cloister in Erfurt in 2011 Pope Benedict described the question “How do I receive the grace of God” as the driving force of Luther’s life. He added that “Luther’s thinking, his whole spirituality, was thoroughly Christocentric: What promotes Christ’s cause [Was Christum treibet] was for Luther the decisive hermeneutical criterion for the exegesis of sacred Scripture.”[2]

The same driving force can also be detected in Ratzinger/Benedict’s own theological contributions. His approach to dealing with the fact of multiple different interpretations of the documents of the Second Vatican Council was to suggest that all the documents be read with a Christocentric accent. He also argued that scriptural exegesis needed to be approached from within the horizon of faith and when in 1969 he published his famous critique of the treatment of human dignity in Gaudium et Spes, he was not shy of suggesting that sections of the document could do with a dose of Luther’s theology of the cross.

The Evangelical Bishop, Wolfgang Huber, has been quoted as saying that Ratzinger is one of the few people who really know Luther’s work and Lutheran pastors who converted during his pontificate often remark that he is the only pope who has ever understood Luther. Ratzinger himself claimed to have read all of Luther’s pre-Reformation works in the original language. This knowledge made possible the historic signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification approved by both the Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation. The language of the declaration was ‘nutted out’ by Cardinal Ratzinger at a private meeting with Bishop Johannes Hanselmann, a former president of the World Lutheran Federation, and long-standing friend.

Ideas can only be fought with alternative ideas that acknowledge whatever truth there is in the proposition or theory to be combatted. Ratzinger, forever the scholar, dealt with the Lutheran tradition in this way. He saw it as the outcome of a poorly handled crisis in late medieval scholasticism and used his knowledge of the history to bring about a high degree of healing.

**THE RESPONSE TO KANT**

In the aftermath of the theological trauma of the 16th century, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) set about offering an account of religion within the bounds of reason alone, and in particular he sought to offer an account of morality by reference to reason unaided by Christian revelation. He was also of the view that whether there are 3 persons in the deity, or 10, it makes no difference.

The end result of the Kantian revolution was that Catholic scholars found themselves defending the reasonableness of the Catholic faith at the Bar of Kantian rationality. It was rather like engaging in a fight with one hand tied behind one’s back. Revelation was not allowed entry to the battle. Catholic scholars looked somewhat equine speaking out of both sides of their mouths. To non-Catholics they used a philosophical argument, to Catholics a theological argument. The two were not often presented in an integrated form. The necessary side-lining of the Trinity in the philosophical defences gave rise to what Ratzinger calls ‘moralism’ – the reduction of religion to mere ethics, and an ethical framework constructed without any reference to Christ.

The response to Kant entailed an engagement with the triad of concepts – reason, revelation and tradition. Ratzinger began this work in his habilitationsschrift wherein he was critical of the account of revelation found in the works of Francisco Suárez, described as the ‘clutch purse of doctrines’ theory. At Vatican II, Ratzinger, Karl Rahner and others worked on the drafting of Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. They set aside the Suárezian approach and presented revelation as an historical event in which God the Son reveals God the Father to humanity through the aid of God the Holy Spirit.

In a preface to his collected publications Ratzinger reflected that “if neo-Scholastic theology essentially understood Revelation as the divine transmission of mysteries, which remain inaccessible to the human mind, today Revelation is considered as God’s manifestation of himself in an historical action, and salvation history is seen as a central element of Revelation.”[3] The fact that this is so is largely due to the efforts of Johann Adam Möhler, Romano Guardini, Gottlieb Söhngen, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner and Ratzinger himself. The only non-native German speaker on this list is de Lubac.

Far from wanting to keep philosophy and theology chastely separate, Ratzinger’s work often drew faith and reason into a symbiotic or intrinsic relationship. In this context it is said his approach accorded more with the Thomism of Josef Pieper and Étienne Gilson than with so-called Aristotelian Thomism. Pieper never accepted a sharp dichotomy between theology and philosophy. This was in part...
due to his acceptance of Werner Jaeger’s interpretation of Aristotle. Jaeger argued that behind Aristotle’s metaphysics there lies the *credo ut intelligam* – I believe in order that I may understand.

In his *Theology of Karl Barth*, Hans Urs von Balthasar drew attention to the following paragraph from Pieper’s *Über das Ende der Zeit*:[4]

> All real philosophizing necessarily oversteps the boundary of ‘pure philosophy’ to make statements the import of which are not the result of the human effort to know but come to us as something to be accepted. And indeed the basic impulse to pursue philosophy that gets to the roots of things goes beyond the border that divides philosophy from theology, faith and revelation. Thus a philosophy that would insist on remaining a ‘pure philosophy’ would be untrue to itself and would cease being philosophy.

An excellent overview of the different ways Catholic scholars have construed the relationship between theology and philosophy is Aidan Nichols’ *Faith and Reason: From Hermes to Benedict XVI*. Nichols argues that one can find in the works of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI a desire to unite “philosophy and theology in a single, internally differentiated but also internally cohesive, intellectual act.”[5] This means that there is ‘a convergence of the mainly philosophical disclosure of logos with the chiefly theological revelation of love’.

In his 1969 essay on *Gaudium et Spes*, Ratzinger rejected the notion of ‘reason alone’. He commended Augustine for his recognition that the “necessary purification of sight takes place through faith (Acts 15:9) and through love, at all events not as a result of reflection alone and not at all by man’s own power.”[6] This theme is echoed in *Lumen Fidei* which he drafted.

As Gregory Baum and others have argued, there is a need to understand how Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* offers a much richer theological epistemology than Vatican I’s *Dei Filius*, which did not address the issue of how knowledge of God based on human reason is related to the saving actions of God revealed in Christ. Fergus Kerr has noted that “it remained unsettled at Vatican I whether the natural light by which reason can attain knowledge of God should be equated with the prelapsarian light enjoyed by Adam in the Garden of Eden or the light in which someone in a state of grace might exercise his reasoning powers, or the light which someone might supposedly have independently of the effects of sin and grace.”[7] Similarly, Noel O’Sullivan has suggested that what is interesting about *Dei Filius* is not so much what it says but rather “what it doesn’t say” and in particular “one is struck by the absence of a Trinitarian dimension in the definition of 1870.”[8]

The idea of attempting a defence of Christian ethics as if the Incarnation had never occurred is a project that held no appeal for Ratzinger. It is often promoted by Catholic leaders who say that if people no longer believe in Christ, then resort must be had to a Kantian style of reasoning since nothing else has any traction. Ratzinger’s approach, however, was one of acknowledging the component of revelation in Christian ethics, and then defending the superiority of Christian ethics over all the various alternatives by exposing the theological presuppositions which implicitly lie at the base of the alternatives. For example, an ethical framework which is implicitly atheistic often rests on an ontology of original violence (life in the state of nature is nasty, brutish and short), rather than upon an ontology of original peace (the lion lying down with the lamb in Eden’s pastures).

In *Principles of Christian Morality*, co-authored with von Balthasar, Ratzinger argued that the fact that the bible’s moral pronouncements can be traced to other cultures or to philosophical thought in no way implies that morality is a function of mere reason. This intellectual position, he declared, was “a premature conclusion we should not allow to pass unchallenged any longer.”[9]

The combined magisterial works of the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI foster what the young Ratzinger called a “daring new theological anthropocentric. As Ratzinger explained in *Deus Caritas Est*, Truth is a Person.[10] This is about as far away from Kant as one can go.

Although many Catholic institutions continue to teach philosophy and theology as completely separate disciplines without any attempt to integrate the two, the fledgling Sophia University Institute located in the village of Loppiano on the outskirts of Florence has attempted to transcend this dichotomy by establishing a Faculty of Trinitarian Ontology. Piero Coda’s *Dalla Trinità l’avvento di Dio tra storia e profezia* (From the Trinity: The Event of God Between History and Prophesy) and the work *La Persona Umana: Antropologia Teologia* (The
Human Person: A Theological Anthropology) co-written by Cardinal Angelo Scola, Gilfredo Marenghi and Javier Predes-Lopez are guides to how this daring new theological anthropology looks when taken out into the academy and expressed in a curriculum.

**The Departure from Rahner**

Ratzinger’s stance vis-à-vis Kant was a major difference between he and Karl Rahner. Although Ratzinger always gave credit to Rahner for having a nose for the problems facing Catholic theologians in the twentieth century, Ratzinger nonetheless objected to elements of Rahner’s theological anthropology derived from Kant. As he expressed the problem: Rahner appropriated universal reason for Christianity and tried to prove that universal reason leads ultimately to the teachings of Christianity and that the teachings of Christianity are the universally human, the rational par excellence. In the generation that followed Rahner, the direction of his thought was reversed. If the teachings of Christianity are the universally human, the generally held views of man’s reason, then it follows that these generally held views are what is Christian. If that is the case, then one must interpret what is Christian in terms of the universal findings of man’s reason.

In his response Ratzinger rhetorically asked whether it is true that Christianity adds nothing to the universal but merely makes it known: Is the Christian really just man as he is? Does not the whole dynamism of history stem from the pressure to rise above man as he is? Is not the main point of the faith of both Testaments that man is what he ought to be only by conversion, that is, when he ceases to be what he is? Does not such a concept which turns being into history but also history into being, result in a vast stagnation despite the talk of self-transcendence as the content of man’s being? Against Rahner’s treatment of the relationship between history and ontology, Ratzinger suggested that “we must comprehend why God’s universalism (God wants everyone to be saved) makes use of the particularism of the history of salvation (from Abraham to the Church).” and further, that “concern for the salvation of others should not lead us to ignore more or less this particularism of God: salvation history and world history must not be regarded as identical entities just because God’s concern for them must be extended to all.”[11]

**The Response to Bultmann & Dibelius**

The long shadow of Kantian rationality also fell over the territory of German scripture scholarship, especially the works of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) and Martin Dibelius (1883-1947). Bultmann denied that readers of the scriptures had any hope of an objective understanding of the events there depicted, and suggested that the important factor was the existential impact of Scripture which could not be spelled out in a dogmatic form. Linked to the methodology of Bultmann and Dibelius was the search for the historical Jesus. The initiator of this quest was the German Deist philosopher H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768) who offered rationalistic explanations for miracles. He was followed by D. F. Strauss (1808-1874), author of The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined, and Strauss was followed by Bruno Bauer (1809-1882). Although Bauer accused Strauss of misrepresenting the ideas of Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), he nonetheless continued the ‘historical Jesus’ project by arguing that Christianity represents a synthesis of the Stoicism of Seneca the Younger and the Jewish theology of Philo. Ernst Käsemann (1906-1976) and Martin Dibelius (1883-1947). One of Bultmann’s pupils, started another quest in 1954 and then in the 1990s the project took on a new form in the Jesus Seminar and the work of J.P. Meier.

In response to these waves of rationalist engagements with Christianity’s sacred texts, Ratzinger concluded: Certainly texts must first of all be traced back to their historical origins and interpreted in their proper historical context. But then, in a second exegetical operation, one must look at them also in light of the total movement of history and in light of history’s central event, Jesus Christ. Only the combination of both these methods will yield understanding of the Bible.

Such principles are to be found in a more expanded form in the documents The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993) and The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible (2002). These were promulgated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission under the chairmanship of Ratzinger.

**The Response to Heidegger**

In an essay published in 1976 Bernard Lonergan wrote “to put it bluntly, until we move onto the level of historical dynamics, we shall face our secularist and atheistic opponents as the Red Indians, armed with bows and arrows, faced European...
muskets.”[12] Ratzinger was well aware of this problem. In his Principles of Catholic Theology he wrote that the most serious theological crisis of the twentieth century was coming to an understanding of the mediation of history in the realm of ontology. In short-hand terms, it is the Heideggerian ‘being in time’ issue. Catholic anthropology needs to hold the ontological and historical dimensions of human existence together in such a way that one does not eclipse the other.

Joseph Ratzinger dealt with this problem by developing what is called the dimension of relationality – that part of the human person which is determined by his or her relationships with other persons, including each of the Persons of the Trinity. In his essay on the notion of the person in theology he argued that the Boethian definition of the human person as an individual substance of a rational nature offered a woefully inadequate anthropology.[13]

Ratzinger also argued against the view that scripture has nothing to say about being; however, in contrast to the Greek concept of being, Ratzinger emphasised that the Biblical idea of creatureliness means having one’s origin, not in a passive idea, but in a creative freedom. While the Greek God is a pure and changeless being, the hallmarks of the Biblical God are relationship and action. The human being is a being in time, but this being has been made in the image of God and is not a mere product of random social forces.

THE RESPONSE TO NIETZSCHE

While pre-Conciliar theology was focused upon the transcendental of truth, it had little if anything to say about being; however, it is the 19th century criticism but that it is not erotic (the 19th century criticism). Updating the idiom of Nietzsche, the charge was that Christianity is the religion for nerds. This became one of the key ideas of the generation of 1968. Soixante-huitards usually don’t get bogged down in arguments about the rationality of Christianity because they are just not into rationality and they tend to be suspicious of people who are. Belief in rationality is dangerously close to a belief in a master narrative. In post-modern lexicons master narratives are by definition oppressive. When dealing with a neo-Nietzschean it is better to present Christianity as the real friend of freedom and eros, than to make arguments about the inherent rationality of Christianity.

In Deus Caritas Est Ratzinger as Benedict XVI addressed the Nietzschean charge that Christianity killed eros. He did so by arguing that the relationship between eros and agape is symbiotic. John Paul II had already broken this ground in his Wednesday audience catechesis on human love and Ratzinger followed through the logic of this intervention.

In earlier publications Ratzinger had acknowledged that the Church’s presentation of sexual ethics had been so poor as to foster what French psychologists called ‘la maladie catholique’. He defined this as a “special neurosis that is the product of a warped pedagogy so exclusively concentrated on the fourth and sixth commandments that the resultant complex with regard to authority and purity renders the individual incapable of free self-development.”[14] Nietzsche may well have been reacting against a similar pedagogy in his own Protestant milieu. The Wojtyla-Ratzinger response was the development of a theological vision which places sexuality within the context of the love shared between the Persons of the Trinity.

THE ALLIANCE WITH VON BALTHASAR

The presentation of Christian life as a theodrama whose chief actors are the Persons of the Trinity and individual human persons with talents and passions and unique personal histories is somewhat more erotic than the notion of Christianity as a moral code for dutiful nerds. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s five volume Theodramatics re-framed the question of whether or not Christianity is on the side of human freedom and eros. What von Balthasar understood was that the last couple of centuries of European history were a conflict over the foundational myths of European culture, and in particular, over which myth is consonant with the greatest amount of human freedom and self-development.

The conflict reached its climax in the Nazi era with the Jewish and Christian “myths” pitted against neo-pagan Norse mythology, spiced with occult elements, sexual perversions and common garden variety herd behaviour. In his Apocalypse of the German Soul, completed in 1939, von Balthasar concluded that a high degree of the blame for the carnage could be traced to Kant in the sense that the Kantian idea of rationality kick started a diabolical process which taken to its logical extreme ended in Dachau. In his famous 1914 Lecture “From Kant to Krupp” Vladimir Ern also took the view that
“violent outbursts of German nationalism were prepared by the Kantian analytic” and that “the interior transcription of the German spirit in Kant’s philosophy rightly and inevitably coincides with the external transcription of the same spirit in the weapons of Krupp.”[15]

Anyone who has ever stood in the Odeonsplatz in Munich and looked down Ludwigstrasse in one direction and toward Marienplatz in the other is struck by the incongruity. In one direction there is a square dominated by a statue of the Queen of Heaven. A few blocks in the opposite direction Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans were arrested and beheaded for suggesting that there might be something morally problematic about genocide. This was no mere difference of opinion about what is reasonable. In Balthasar’s idiom, this was “a battle of the logos.”

Ratzinger once remarked that it was impossible for him to say how much he owed to Balthasar. No doubt in the future whole doctoral dissertations will be dedicated to this subject. Suffice to say that Ratzinger shared Balthasar’s Trinitarian Christocentric approach to this battle. Even in his dialogue with Jürgen Habermas, who is perhaps the leading contemporary advocate for Kantian-style rationality, Ratzinger spoke of creation and the Creator and suggested that while there can be pathologies of religion, there can also be pathologies of reason.[16] A form of reason which is foreclosed against revelation has a tendency to turn pathological.

THE HOMAGE TO GUARDINI & THE SHOT AT FEUERBACH

Ratzinger, like von Balthasar and Rahner, was a student of Romano Guardini, the co-founder of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria who held various Chairs in German Universities and was for a time chaplain to the German Catholic youth movement. All three have paid tribute to his influence. Rahner described him as a Christian humanist who led German Catholics out of an intellectual ghetto. Balthasar said that Guardini believed that “it is not Christ who is in the world, but the world that is in Christ” and that the “immensity of this reversal” was the very basis of Guardini’s thought. As Victor Consemus notes, Ratzinger praised Guardini for seizing upon philosophical questions of life and existence and illustrating them with literary themes or with great figures of the faith, thereby enabling Catholic theology to remain in dialogue with the broader academic world. [17] Guardinian watermarks can be found on many of Ratzinger’s pages including the encyclical Lumen Fidei. Sandro Magister has also observed that both Guardini’s 1938 book The Essence of Christianity and Ratzinger’s 1968 book Introduction to Christianity are responses to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), the German philosopher who argued that Christianity is merely a projection of the human imagination to satisfy psychological needs. Karl Marx (1818-1883), yet another German philosopher, took Feuerbach’s materialism and married it to Hegel’s dialectical cosmology with diabolical consequences. As the story goes, the Hegelians of the Left and the Hegelians of the Right met in the battle of Stalingrad, for which the death toll was circa 1 million.

For half a millennium the world of theology has been dominated by people who speak German. The Italians might run the Curia but the Germans provide the lion’s share of the ideas. Ratzinger was the long awaited reply to a series of Germanic wrong turns. The question: “How did we get to Dachau?” could never have been far from his mind. He answered the question as the faithful son of the Bavaria of Altötting, rather than the Bavaria of the Wandervögel. ■

ENDNOTES


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Rev. Neil Roy, College of St. Mary Magdalen

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Rt. Rev. Peter Comensoli
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Nigel Biggar, Oxford University

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Elvira Parravicini, MD, Columbia Univ. Medical Center

The travesty of Bill 52 and the Quebec commission on Dying with Dignity
Margaret Somerville, FRSC, McGill University

What theology brings to the concept of ‘dignity’
Paul Allen, Concordia University

The history of the movement in favour of physician-assisted suicide
Ian Dowbiggin, FRSC, University of Prince Edward Island

Euthanasia in Italian and EU constitutional law
Chiara Berneri, City University of London


[8] Noel O’Sullivan, Christ and Creation: Christology as the Key to Interpreting the Theology of Creation in the Works of Henri Lubac (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 139.


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