

The Tridentine Genius of Vatican II*

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I

FIFTY YEARS after the opening of the Second Vatican Council there are two schools of thought that typically dominate the interpretation of that event. One is derivative of the theology surrounding the post-conciliar journal *Concilium*, which was founded by theologians like Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx. It advances a progressivist reading of the Council: Vatican II stands for engagement with modernity, liberation of women, dialogue with world religions, liberalization of sexual morays, laicization of the mission of the Church, and liberal political advocacy. The other current stems from the thinkers who founded the journal *Communio*, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger. It reads the Council as a bold new vision of a distinctively Catholic way of being in the midst of modernity. The agenda is inevitably counter-cultural: the Church as a sign and instrument of salvation in Christ, nuptial theology that stresses the importance of gender complementarity, Eucharistic communion and sacramental marriage as the core of a healthy society, teaching and evangelization as the heart of the Christian mission in the modern world.

It can be useful to take the debate between these two schools as paradigmatic, employing their opposed interpretations as a framework for thinking about the Council and its aftermath. Perhaps, however, there is another juxtaposition to propose, one that does not overlap exactly with the options mentioned above. On this reading, there are also only two ultimate ways of reading the Council's message, one through the interpretive lens of John Henry Newman, the other through that of Friedrich Nietzsche.

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Nietzsche is undoubtedly the hermeneutic master of our age. His influence, once confined primarily to the Parisian Left Bank and Ivy League English departments is now the intellectual stimulant of the culture at large. Every interpretation of a text, no matter how supposedly authoritative, is always, already laced with the dominant will to power of the interpreter. We invoke authoritative texts (the constitution, the Bible, the Magisterium) not so as to get at the truth but so as to leverage influence over others and for the preferential option of one's self or one's ideological tribe. Even more radically, texts are invoked not only to such political ends, but precisely so as to create theory itself. The interpreter is not a discoverer but a fabricator of truth. Prelates and professors spin narratives to believe in. In reality, then, truth claims only ever have the objectivity of works of art. This battle of the "will to power" Nietzsche also calls in his later notebooks a "will to art." Every time we encounter the other's opinion, the war of loves ensues. Whose art is better? Which should we love most? Of course, based on this understanding of textual interpretation there is no such thing as a solid truth claim. Everything falls into the realm of preferences and power. Everything is perspectival.

However unwillingly or not, the Catholic progressive left has taken up in its own way the hermeneutical presuppositions of Nietzsche: this in the implicit understanding of an interpretation of Christian teaching that centers above all upon the power of authority. The presupposition of modern Catholic liberalism is that the Church's teaching down through time is inevitably composed of heterogeneous perspectives, both moral and doctrinal. On this reading, Vatican II is in some way a repudiation of the teachings of Vatican I or Trent. Doctrinal unity does not come about through an intellectual vision of the whole, of the organic continuity of perspective across the ages. Rather, the unity of Church teaching ultimately comes about by way of judicial fiat. It is the product of willful fabrication. How should we interpret the meaning of Vatican II and the essence of modern Catholicism? That depends upon who ultimately is telling the story. The Magisterium (Bl. John Paul II, Benedict XVI, the 1994 *Catechism*) asserts one reading of the Council, but it is taken as the artificial imposition of an extrinsic, authoritarian will. Against this, we should substitute the will to authority of the laity or the dissenting clergy, who can re-construe the narrative unity of Catholic doctrine from their own heterogeneous perspective, usually with the idea of the Council as revolution. John XXIII "opening the windows" of the Church is something like breaking down the door of the Bastille. This helps explain why the left is so obsessed with incessantly retelling the history of the Council. Recounting their own cathartic story of liberation again and again is

not merely the collective means of safeguarding meaning against the telling of the bishops. It is the act of fabrication of an alternative doctrinal truth. Progressivist Catholics then lack any way back to a fundamental doctrinal unity because their hermeneutic of suspicion has blocked any possible appeal to final authority. Instead, we are left with mere human perspectives. Divine revelation is reconstrued as artifice.

Of course, in saying all this I seem to be less polite to the *Concilium* people than I ought to be. After all, I am clearly suggesting that the essence of Catholic liberalism is nihilism, and that seems to be too extreme a claim. But it is in fact simply an accurate claim. There is either meaning in the world or there is not. And Catholic liberalism, because of its hermeneutical stance toward the tradition of the Catholic Church, is unable in the end to sustain a coherent claim that there is meaning in the world. Unlike liberal Catholicism, traditional forms of Protestantism have the advantage of being internally coherent, and therefore more intrinsically credible. They are also deeply unstable as forms of belief and practice, but that is a different problem to have and it is not something inherently incompatible with the affirmation of meaning. The choice between Catholicism and Protestantism is an intelligibly meaningful one. The choice between orthodox and heterodox Catholicism is not.

Newman offers us a different view from all of this. Clearly in the late nineteenth century he stood for certain values that anticipated the developments of Vatican II, even things the theological left might consent to: a moderate interpretation of papal infallibility; an emphasis on the ecclesial significance of the laity; theological ecumenism; and the idea that the Church in the modern world should distinguish between her unchanging essence and a particular historical instantiation of Catholicism that predominated just prior to the French Revolution. Presumably for such reasons, Pope Paul VI went as far as to speak of Vatican II as “Newman’s Council.” And yet, Newman’s interpretive principles of Church councils were not liberal. As he made very clear in his Biglietto speech of 1879: “For fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion. . . . [It] is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another. . . . It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as *true*.” As it turns out in retrospect, Newman’s *Apologia* offers the most rhetorically potent defense of Roman authority written in the nineteenth century. His hermeneutical principles function not from the perspective of the primacy of the will to power, but from the perspective of consent over time to a unified and perennial truth, perceived across the ages.

Toward this end, he proposes the interpretation of ecclesial texts by something like what has come to be called a hermeneutic of continuity:

ideas expand and develop in harmonious ways down through time. The *Apologia* and the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* allow that a fair amount of human dialectic and political battle can be the *occasion* (but not the inner mechanic) for this development. But on a deeper level, Newman sees through to something more mysterious and more real: the *life* of the Church as a life of truth and grace. Down through time, the Church goes from being herself more intensively to being herself more fully, from stem to blossom. It is not merely that there are common ideas down through time (though this is true and especially important). It is also that there is a common dynamic development of the inner life of the Church in the world, a mysterious life spanning across ages, growing in a consistent fashion. Not human political art, but divine supernatural life, is the essence of Catholic Christianity.

II

How, then, can we identify the living expression of the Catholic Church in the modern age? Trent is the first of the great modern Catholic councils, and we might rightly see it as a kind of doctrinal embryo that grows and develops as modern Catholicism blossoms, both at Vatican I and at Vatican II, in organic continuity, not artistic rupture. Here let's choose three traits of the Council of Trent that reassert themselves in vital fashion across the ages: sacramentality, authority and rationality, and holiness. By these three measures, Vatican II shows itself a council thoroughly grafted onto the genetic legacy of Trent, and one of great organic vitality, as well as intellectual genius. We might speak then of the Tridentine genius, and the Tridentine vitality, of Vatican II.

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In response to the Reformers, the Council of Trent underscored that the Church is a unified reality, both visible and invisible, composed of political society and of the life of grace. As Bellarmine provocatively put it: "the Church is as visible as the kingdom of France." The seed notion at work here is that the unity of the Christian religion is grounded in something very visible and particular: spiritual contact with the seven sacraments. Water, oil, the Eucharist, spoken words of forgiveness, a society of ordained clerics, the grace of married love: these are the humble vehicles, encountered in concrete instances, that communicate the grace of communion with God to the world at large. In defining the seven sacraments as both signs and true causes of grace, the Council of Trent made everything very tangible: this sacramental economy is at the heart of the Christian life.

Vatican I added to this the emphasis on the particularity of communion with the Bishop of Rome. The Petrine office in the Church is meant

to hold together in unity the plurality of a diversity of Churches in the midst of the tumults of the modern world. Here the key interlocutor was not Protestantism, but modern secularism. Nineteenth-century Europe saw the rise of post-Napoleonic regimes that wished to purge public culture of all or most religious influences. In this context, the Catholic Church insisted on the visible bond among all Christians, in visible communion with the Pope, the center and “Greenwich time” of all Christendom. His juridical authority to govern and unite the faithful is the living sign of a deeper vitality that transcends the secular state and the particularities of nationalist politics. The Church unites humanity over and above the totalizing ideologies of the modern nation state and the intellectual velleities of the pundits of secular culture.

Admittedly, there is a common account of Vatican II which claims that the Council sought to correct the heritage of Trent and Vatican I on both these points. The ecumenical aspiration of Vatican II downplayed the emphasis on the seven sacraments (because Protestantism typically affirms only two). The tone of openness to modernity sought to soften the stridency of Vatican I. Such an idea is exaggerated, however, because it ignores a core truth. For Vatican II not only presupposes the Tridentine vision of the Church as a concrete, visible reality but reclaims it as the key to understanding the mysterious working of grace in all of humanity. This is the deeper signification of the famous statement of *Lumen Gentium* 1: “the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.” Turn that around: All human beings, to the extent that they cooperate with the grace of Christ, come under a kind of implicit relationship to the sacramental life of the Catholic Church. Vatican II *universalizes* or expands the comprehension of what is already present at Trent. The human person is called into a visible and invisible fellowship with God, within a unified ecclesial body. One can fail culpably to recognize or embrace this mystery (with terrible consequences), but what is of core importance is that *this is the deeper mystery* of the human race: the visible, sacramental ecclesiality of life in Christ. *It is because this is the case*, and not in spite of it, that the Church can be open to the modern world in an unthreatened fashion, as the key to unlocking the inner secret at work in that world. At the heart of the world is the mystery of Christ and the Church.

Similarly, the emphasis of Vatican I on the unifying role of the papacy is not lost at Vatican II, but it is reasserted as the basis of a communion in the one Church. If each local Church is to be fully herself, she must be in communion with the larger principle of unity, the Church in Rome and her prelate. This does not mean that there are no grounds for

ecumenism, but rather that ecumenism is truly possible and necessary especially because of the Roman primacy. Because there is a way for Christians to be one in a visible way, holding to a common doctrine, just so, they should seek together to understand and transcend their differences. For how would we find mutual doctrinal accord if there were no way to attain a touchstone of unity? Some form of doctrinal infallibility is the necessary condition for doctrinal unity. Paradoxically, we can say with certitude: no pope, no true and final ecumenism. Analogously, if Vatican II states that it is due to the *sensus fidei*—the sense of the faith of the laity—that they are to be consulted in their practices and beliefs, it is not because the *sensus fidei* functions independently of the ecclesial hierarchy. Rather it is because the life of the laity in ordinary society can embody and express with its own unique genius and sanctity the concrete truth of the Gospel proclaimed by the apostolic hierarchy. Because there is a hierarchy, there can also be a distinct and complementary mission of witness and teaching that is particular to the laity.

On this reading, Newman is right: the Church is alive in a myriad of ways, both in profound unity and in genuine, diversified vitality: in the sacraments, in the grace of Christ working invisibly to lead persons outside the Church to encounter Christ fully in the sacraments, in the Church in Rome and in her sister Churches, in the bishops and in the laity. The Council's insistence on the sacramental visibility of the Church becomes a point of continuity with the past, not a point of rupture.

III

Consider another modern Catholic touchstone: the relationship between authority and rationality. The standard secular narrative is that we have to choose between appeal to a unified doctrinal authority and the openness of human rationality to the fullness of the universal truth. From Trent to Vatican II we see a contrary teaching: authentic apostolic authority and vital human rationality are not only complementary, but deeply mutually enriching.

Trent committed the Catholic Church in modernity to this stance through that most authoritative of pronouncements: the affirmation of the Greek-language books of the Old Testament as inspired. By accepting the complete Septuagint as the authoritative Scripture of the Church, the Roman Catholic Church in modernity knowingly committed herself to a very ambitious project of historical study. How should we understand the narrative of the development of the books of the Bible, from the Torah and prophets (in Hebrew) to the inter-testamental literature (Hellenized Judaism), to the New Testament, but also on to the interpretations of the patristic age and the formation of the biblical canon during

the time of the early Christological disputes? For the Council of Trent, historical rationality and the divine authority of Scripture are to be seen not in competition but in profound concord. In the wake of that Council, the Church sought to win over the academic culture of Europe by making historical arguments about the true genesis and development of early Christianity. For as Newman said, “to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant.” This strategy committed the institution, however, to an ambitious new program of seminary and universities studies, one which was in turn propagated throughout Europe by the episcopacy and which renewed the study of philosophy and sacred theology in the early modern period.

Vatican I carried this program forward in conversation with the secular Enlightenment. *Dei Filius* insisted, against secular reason, on the infallibility of divine revelation: revelation is a gift that human rationality cannot procure for itself. Yet it also underscored the high natural capacities of human reason (our philosophical capacity to know of the existence of God, to cooperate with divine revelation). Thus, against the reductive tendency of modern thought that so easily rejects appeal to divine authority, Vatican I sought to underscore the existence of a fruitful, liberating interaction between sacred theology and human rationality. The two are not at war, but may mutually interact with one another in peace and liveliness. Revelation is a gift to human reason seeking perspective. Reason seeking meaning can arrive at the threshold of the question of God and can therefore admit the open possibility of divine revelation.

It is easy to see that the modern Church’s living confidence in both divine authority and human rationality flowers at Vatican II, bringing to greater fullness what is present in seed at Trent and in stem at Vatican I. For instance, *Dei Verbum*, the document on divine revelation, affirms that the Holy Spirit is the principal author of sacred Scripture but that the Bible is also always to be understood as the simultaneous product of true human authors. There is no rivalry, then, between divine causality and human creativity. Rather, God the Holy Spirit works through the living instrument of human rationality. Consequently, there need be no opposition between the study of the cultural context of a particular author and pursuit of the inspired, deepest meaning of the text. Each should in principle facilitate a deeper appreciation of the other. Analogously, the document *Gaudium et Spes* called for an integrated understanding of modern cosmology and human political and moral life, in concord with divine revelation. Engagement with the sciences or with the study of modern constitutional law is not inimical to a biblical understanding of reality, but profoundly compatible. More to the point, only the theological vision of the human

person who is created in the image of God can give *final* explanation to the development of the physical cosmos and the world of living things. Only theological recognition of the dignity of the human being who is redeemed in Christ can give *ultimate* justification to the humanist aspirations of modern democratic government and the legal system of rights.

In a last example, *Nostra Aetate* underscored the importance of a search for intelligent points of contact between divine revelation and the diverse religious traditions of humanity. Proclamation of the Gospel and intellectual study of other religious traditions are not competing ideas, if each is rightly conceived. One can seek to explain and promote Christianity while also seeking to understand and learn culturally from the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim traditions. Most especially, the Church's engagement with the Jewish people stems first from her recognition of the authority of Christ. This engagement requires that the Church take account of the theological and moral implications of the grave mistreatment of Jews by baptized persons, in both medieval and modern Europe. As the Church in modernity simultaneously embraces the exploration of divine revelation and the expansion of human reason, the mystery of the faith itself does not change, but the way that mystery is understood, articulated, and transmitted does develop. Through this development, doctrines are clarified and purifications occur. In and through the process, the Church is called to become more herself, more attentive to the truth that she bears within herself, in order to proclaim it with integrity and vitality to the world.

IV

Consider the third theme, holiness. On one level, the Reformation was most fundamentally about the doctrine of justification: what is it that makes us righteous before God? We know Luther's bold answer: justification by faith alone, apart from works. The Church took issue with this definition, but the key note of discord had nothing to do with the notion of justification as a gift of grace. All were agreed on that. Nor was the conflict about the need for supernatural faith. Again, the Church insisted at Trent that faith is necessary for salvation. Rather, the heart of the matter had to do with Luther's formula *simul justus et peccator*: the claim that one could be just by faith, while simultaneously alienated from God in the will by the interior wound of sin. Against such a notion, Trent taught that the infusion of supernatural charity is an essential dimension of justification. In the fallen human person, the disordered loves of sin turn the human will away from God. By the grace of justification, it is faith, hope, and love together that turn the human person freely and voluntarily away from sin and back toward God, all through the power of Christ.

If we step back from the polemics of the Reformation era, we might ask what is at stake in this technical theological argument? One answer is: the Church's insistence on the essential character of holiness at the core of Christian life. For there is no Christian life without charity. The seed idea of Trent, then, is that charity is at the root of all authentic Christian life.

Charity, however, is not something only interior, but is also something lived out in the street. At Vatican I, the Church militant placed insistence on the public and social character of religion, in the face of the militant secular state, which wished to confine religion to a merely privatized "freedom of worship." The inner core of this Catholic militancy is based on a deep understanding of the all-embracing character of religion. Since charity impels the human person toward the service of God in all things, it is not feasible to ask the religious person to quarantine his or her belief behind the curtain of private life. Catholic charity bears fruit through public, Christian institutions. This is not to say that Vatican I pushed for a state-imposed religiosity (it did not). It did hold for the principle of integrity. For the Catholic Christian is called to submit all the spheres of life to the mystery of God. Holiness is the fruit of such integrity, and it tolerates no half measures of self-offering. It stems instead from the victory in the human person of radical, oblation love.

This is a theme that flowers, meanwhile, in Vatican II. The Council emphasized the "universal call to holiness" of all of Christ's faithful, the people of God. Baptism brings with it intrinsically a vocational calling to holiness that is grounded in the life of charity. Family life and political processes should be affected at their root by this engagement on the part of the laity, and that engagement can transform the world. But the world also can and does resist the holiness of God. It is not surprising then, that *Gaudium et Spes* should enjoin Christians to public practices of Christian charity that can take place through the instrumentality of the state: education of the poor, economic development in underprivileged countries, the pursuit of international peace. But by the same measure, the Council also demarcates the threats to sacramental married life that strike at the heart of the holiness of a civilization: adultery, abortion, and contraception are all referred to expressly.

Of course, this theme of the Council ties in with the sacramental vision mentioned above. We are frail human beings, in need of spiritual healing and elevation, dependent upon nourishment and continual aid from God. The sacramental life is the visible sphere wherein the baptized Christian can be habitually rejuvenated, in order to bring the mystery of Christ visibly and invisibly into the heart of modernity. Vatican II's emphasis on holiness is grounded in Tridentine presuppositions: the charity of the sacraments of

reconciliation and the Eucharist stands at the heart of the Christian calling to renew the world.

V

Some today, particularly among younger Catholics, wonder not if the Council is true, but whether it is of any great help to us in our contemporary setting. After all, the council fathers did not really foresee the radical secularization of Europe and the Americas that was beginning just as the documents were being published. It is not surprising that in our new and very challenging context, many would look back to the liturgical spirituality and theology of Trent and Vatican I as expressions of vibrant Catholic identity. If people think this is strange, they are mistaken. For it makes perfect sense in light of the “life” analogy of Newman. If the organism is under attack from diseases of internal dissent and external persecution, it is normal to go back to the living sap. These earlier configurations of Catholicism are like the stem and the root, wherein the life of the modern Church is expressed in concentrated fashion. In that sense they are not obsolete or lost, but remain present and of perennial importance.

Nevertheless, the stem and the root are meant to flower, and the flowering of the Church occurs through the Christian life of charity and the public, credible proclamation of the truth. It is precisely because Catholic Christianity is not sectarian but cosmopolitan and culture-forming that it must remain ever engaged with the world around it. The modern Church is indeed a sacramentally visible order. She recognizes simultaneously the absolute importance of both divine authority and public rationality. She is committed at her heart to the life of holiness. Because all this is true, the confidence of the Second Vatican Council should continue to speak to us. The faith of the Church truly can transform the world, even as leaven in the dough, or as the lamp that illumines an entire room. Newman was acutely sensitive to the great difficulty and simultaneous grandeur of being a Christian in the contemporary age. The Christian is always a stranger in the world, but the Christian is the soul of the world as well. The greatness and promise of this vocation can be underscored by a patient and tradition-based reading of the Second Vatican Council. That Council teaches us confidence. For in modernity the Church surely does travel through a dark night of faith, but she also bears within herself the hidden and radiant presence of the inextinguishable light of Christ. N V