

No Decapitated Body

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Remembering and Misremembering Vatican II

HAVING REACHED the biblical four-score years, one is more and more drawn to consider gratefully the blessings one has received in the course of one's life. Among these was the gift of being in Rome as a seminarian during the four sessions of the Second Vatican Council. Though only standing on the margins of that epochal event, one still could not help being drawn into the drama of the Council, both experientially and intellectually. I think it fair to say that my subsequent years of priestly ministry and theological teaching and writing have been decisively oriented and inspired by the event and documents of the Council.

However, it would be disingenuous not to confess my persuasion that for all the gains the Council set in motion, some of its promise has faded and, in some instances, has even been subverted. Benedict XVI, in his well-known 2005 Christmas Address to the Curia, acknowledged that there has arisen, in some quarters, what he termed an “hermeneutics of rupture and discontinuity.” It would be well to recall his words:

The question arises: Why has the implementation of the Council, in large parts of the Church, thus far been so difficult? Well, it all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or—as we would say today—on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face

and quarreled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit.

On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture”; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the “hermeneutic of reform,” of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God.¹

Moreover, such an assessment on the part of Joseph Ratzinger was not the reactionary conclusion of an aging Pontiff. It was already evident even before the Council had adjourned and emerged forcefully in the famous lectures the young theologian gave at Tübingen in 1967.

In the “Preface” to *Introduction to Christianity*, dated Summer 1968, Ratzinger lamented the growing “confusion about the real content and meaning of Christian faith” and the consequent “watering down of its demands.”² He provocatively recounts the parable of “Clever Hans” who successively exchanges the gold which he had inherited for items of lesser value until he is left, at last, with a worthless stone which he insouciantly discards.

Then, in 1992, looking back upon the situation in 1972 when the new journal *Communio* was founded, Ratzinger spoke of some in the immediate post-conciliar period who made endless appeals to the supposed “spirit” of the Council. He wrote: “They sold goods from the old liberal flea-market as if they were new Catholic theology.”³ Indeed, it was precisely to counter this hollowing out of Catholic substance that Ratzinger, together with Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar launched the new journal.

On a third occasion, in the “Preface” to the new edition of *Introduction to Christianity* in 2000, Ratzinger specifies (what was already abundantly clear in the first edition): the “crisis” in question was—and remains—fundamentally a *Christological crisis*.

Here he states his conviction concerning the way forward beyond our current enervating impasses:

¹ w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html.

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster, rev. ed. with new “Preface” (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 31.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, “*Communio*: A Program,” *Communio* 19, no. 3 (1992): 437.

If God has truly assumed manhood, and thus is, at the same time, true man and true God in Jesus, then he participates as man in the presence of God, which embraces all ages. Then, and only then, is he, not just something that happened yesterday, but is present among us, our contemporary in our today. That is why I am firmly convinced that a renewal of Christology must have the courage to see Christ in all his greatness, as he is presented by the four gospels together, in the many tensions of their unity.⁴

The crucial issue, then, was and remains Christological. Having experienced in Rome the unfolding event of the Council, the drama of the debate and refining of the texts, the cultural mutations in the climate of clerical Rome, one could not but be aware that important change was in the air.

But, despite notable changes, one was also conscious that the foundations of the Church's life and theology were firmly in place. Indeed, they seemed to stand out all the more clearly. And, for all the Council's undoubted focus upon the Church, its nature and mission, those foundations were not the Church itself, but the Church's Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The very first words of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, made that abundantly clear: "*Lumen gentium cum sit Christus.*"⁵ In many ways the Council's achievement could be read as a prolonged meditation upon the meaning and implications of Saint Paul's confession: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which has been laid: Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11).

Indeed, I have long argued that the documents of the Council are "Christologically saturated,"⁶ instancing not only *Lumen Gentium*, but *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Dei Verbum*, and even the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*—all of which must not be read in isolation, but "intertextually," mutually illuminating and reinforcing one another. Without belaboring the point at great length, let me simply recall one particularly salient passage from *Gaudium et Spes*, since its Christocentric confession and vision are so clearly on display.

⁴ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 29.

⁵ It would be well to recall the first line of *Lumen Gentium*, which recapitulates the Council's agenda: "Since Christ is the light of the nations, this holy synod, called together in the Holy Spirit, strongly desires to enlighten all people with his brightness, which gleams over the face of the church, by preaching the gospel to every creature (see Mark 16:15)" [Tanner translation].

⁶ Robert P. Imbelli, *Rekindling the Christic Imagination: Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), xiii–xxviii.

The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, offers, through His Spirit, the light and the strength to respond to their highest vocation. Nor has any other name under heaven been given to men and women by which they may be saved. She likewise believes that in her Lord and Master can be found the key, the center, and the goal of all human history. The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, “who is the same yesterday and today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). Therefore, it is in the light of Christ, “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature” (Col 1:15), that the council intends to address all men and women in order to shed light on the mystery of humankind and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding questions of our own time.⁷

The Christological foundation of *Gaudium et Spes*’s “pastoral” commitment and concern is patent, though too often neglected by advocates of a “social justice” that lacks distinctively Christian roots.⁸

John O’Malley, in his history of Vatican II, has written that three categories, *aggiornamento*, development, and *ressourcement*, “plunge us into the dynamics of the Council.” And he continues: “Of the three categories *ressourcement* was the most traditional, yet potentially the most radical.”⁹ But still more radical is what I have called Vatican II’s defining achievement, namely its re-Sourcement,¹⁰ its Spirit-guided return to the Source of the Church’s being and life: Jesus Christ.

Thus, in its robust Christological confession and its explicitly Christocentric agenda, Vatican II realized one of the primary goals of the mid-twentieth century theological movement that became known as *la nouvelle théologie*.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes* §10 (my translation). This passage is particularly noteworthy since it is the conclusion of the constitution’s “Introduction” and thus sets the stage and provides the theological orientation for the two main parts that follow. For a brief but important account of the development of this “Christological Credo” of *Gaudium et Spes* and the roles of Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger in its elaboration, see Jared Wicks, S.J., *Investigating Vatican II: Its Theologians, Ecumenical Turn, and Biblical Commitment* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of American Press, 2018), 213–18.

⁸ I take it that the reweaving of the intimate nexus between Christological doctrine and pastoral commitment to social justice was a major aim of the last of Benedict XVI’s trio of encyclicals, *Caritas in Veritate* (w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html).

⁹ John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 300, 301.

¹⁰ Imbelli, *Rekindling the Christic Imagination*, xxiv, 79.

Theologians such as Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and Yves Congar sought to go back beyond the neo-Scholasticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to recover the riches of the biblical, patristic, and medieval traditions. But theirs was no merely antiquarian project. Rather, their key motivation was to reintegrate theology and spirituality in a new synthesis that could spiritually nourish both heart and mind. And the animating center of their vision was Jesus Christ.¹¹

In the concluding chapter of his study of the Council, John O'Malley makes a striking claim. He writes:

Among the recurring themes of the Council expressive of its spirit, the call to holiness is particularly pervasive and particularly important. . . . It is a theme that to a large extent imbued the Council with its finality. If the call to holiness is what the Church is about, as the Constitution on the Church indicates, then it is not surprising that that is what the Council to a large extent was about. Behind the many *ressourcements* of the long nineteenth century lay the persuasion that the past held treasures useful for the present, not so much as knowledge for its own sake but as guides to deeper and more authentic Christian living.¹²

However, I contend that what needs to be stressed far more than O'Malley does is the Christic foundation of this "pervasive" theme of the Council. The Church needs to re-appropriate its own doxological confession: "*Tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu solus Altissimus, Iesu Christe!*" And to do so not as a rote liturgical formula, but as a passionate life-defining conviction and commitment.

**"But when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"
(Luke 18:8)¹³**

This persuasion leads us back, then, to the present and to a Church afflicted

¹¹ A recent article on von Balthasar speaks of his conviction that a crucial component of the crisis of contemporary Catholicism is "its forfeiture of its spiritual and mystical heritage" (Kevin Mongrain, "Hans Urs von Balthasar," in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019], 720). This persuasion was widely shared by those seeking to recover the inseparable nexus between *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* at the Council.

¹² O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 310.

¹³ Cited by Yves Congar at the end of *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, trans. John Bowden, ed. Bernard Lauret with introduction (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 85.

by the sex-abuse crisis and its poisonous fruit. What especially alarms is that, despite a continual call by many to “discernment,” the level of spiritual discernment frequently appears so impoverished. The “analysis” proffered seems too often limited to the intonation of competing mantras. Either the root cause is “clericalism” or it is “homosexuality.” The culprit is either the privileged clerical culture or the decadent ambient culture. Though neither analysis is devoid of insight, both fall woefully short of an adequate discernment of the pathology, and hence provide little direction toward a truly salvific remedy.

In 1975, ten years after the Council, Henri de Lubac felt compelled to pen his sobering assessment about various milieus of theological and pastoral activity in France and elsewhere. He wrote, to his dismay, of a “vast phenomenon of the Church’s self-destruction and inner apostasy.”¹⁴ One can only ponder with trepidation the *cri du coeur* that would issue today from the great theologian who had been attacked quite ferociously both before and after the Council—though, of course, from opposite poles of the ideological spectrum.

Having experienced the aftermath of the Council for fifty-five years now, I confess to finding “apostasy” the apt term. Indeed, on the occasion of the issuance in 2000 of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I wrote an essay in which I suggested that “there is abroad a measure of innocent and, sometimes, quite intentional apostasy.”¹⁵ In light of the experiences of abuse, scandal, and infidelity, of the ensuing twenty years, I would be disposed to remove such qualifications as “a measure,” “innocent,” and “sometimes.”

An intentionally provocative phrase I have since employed to designate the “apostasy” too often in evidence is to speak of an experience and understanding of the Church *etsi Christus non datur*—thus a “decapitated body.”¹⁶

I wish in the remainder of this section briefly to outline some symptoms of this disease, to provide a fever chart, if you will, that each can verify

¹⁴ Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, trans. Anne Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 148. It is worth noting that the subtitle of Louis Bouyer’s book *Newman’s Vision of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) is “A Theology for Times of General Apostasy.”

¹⁵ Robert Imbelli, “The Reaffirmation of the Christic Center,” in *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus*, ed. Stephen J. Pope and Charles Hefling (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 98.

¹⁶ If my analysis of the pathological condition has any merit, it suggests the inadequacy of the “field hospital” metaphor. The condition requires “long term” healing and rehabilitation.

and record with greater detail from their own discernment of our ecclesial plight. Here, then, are four manifestations that one experiences in hymns and sermons, as well as in both popular and academic journals. And each of them traduces the explicit Christo-logic of the Council's constitutions. By the same token, a creative re-appropriation of the Council's constitutions, in their full Christological concentration, does indicate a way forward for the future.¹⁷

The first symptom of our current malady is a "horizontalism" in the liturgy which completely distorts *Sacrosanctum Concilium's* call for "active participation." So often the challenging summons to a personal participation in and appropriation of the Paschal Mystery of Christ, which is the heart of the liturgical celebration, has been trivialized into the assuming of overt liturgical functions which, however important, should serve to only evoke and foster that deeper reality.¹⁸

It is well known that Joseph Ratzinger deplored this "development," attributing it, in no small measure, to the change in the priest's posture vis-à-vis the congregation. Now, facing the people, the priest almost inevitably calls undue attention to himself. Further, Ratzinger contends that "the turning of the priest toward the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle." He continues: "In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is closed in on itself."¹⁹ The liturgy thus risks losing its eschatological and, indeed, its cosmic dimensions.

Too often the practical outcome is a forgetfulness of Jesus Christ, a de-centering of him who is ever the prime agent of the celebration, the Head of the Body. The salutary recovery of Christ's presence in the congregation can result in losing sight of the Lord who always stands "over against" the congregation as well as in its midst. In one of his last audiences in Saint Peter's Square, Benedict XVI insisted with fervor: "If in the celebration the centrality of Christ did not emerge, we would not have Christian liturgy, totally dependent on the Lord and sustained by his

¹⁷ This conviction stands at the heart of Matthew Levering, *An Introduction to Vatican II as an Ongoing Theological Event* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), especially chapter 5, "Vatican II as an Ongoing Theological Event: The Way Forward."

¹⁸ For a splendid reflection on Jesus Christ's Paschal Mystery and our full and conscious participation in it as the heart of the Church's liturgical life, see Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., *Awesome Glory: Resurrection in Scripture, Liturgy, and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2019). I will return to this fine work below.

¹⁹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 80.

creative presence. God acts through Christ and we can act only through and in him.”²⁰

Hence Ratzinger’s constant recourse to Augustine’s injunction: “*Conversi ad Dominum!*”—“turn to the Lord!” Turn to him who is the Head of the Body, from whom the Body continually draws direction and nourishment, without whom we can do nothing. Thus, turned to the Lord, we recognize that the meal, of which Jesus is the unique host, is the fruit of his sacrifice, the *anamnesis* of his Cross and Resurrection.

Thus the “geographic East” is of considerably less importance than the “spiritual East” which fixes our attention on him whose final coming is already anticipated in the Eucharistic celebration. To this end Pope Benedict placed a cross upon the altar of Saint Peter’s Basilica as iconic representation of him whose sacrifice gives form and substance to the unique meal that is the Eucharist.

Far from being a “decapitated body,” the Church is totally dependent on Christ “who loves her and gives himself up for her.”²¹ As Benedict XVI writes in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*:

The Eucharist is Christ who gives himself to us and continually builds us up as his body. . . . The Church is able to celebrate and adore the mystery of Christ present in the Eucharist precisely because Christ first gave himself to her in the sacrifice of the Cross. . . . We too at every celebration of the Eucharist, confess the primacy of Christ’s gift. The causal influence of the Eucharist at the Church’s origins definitively discloses both the chronological and ontological priority of the fact that it was Christ who loved us “first.” For all eternity he remains the one who loves us first.²²

Let me turn to the second manifestation of what I perceive to be the loss of a vivifying sense of the active presence of the risen and ascended Lord in the midst of the community. It receives pointed expression in Benedict XVI’s forewords to the first two volumes of *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Here he refers explicitly to the negative effects of a sole reliance on a historical-critical approach to the biblical text. It perforce relegates the person of Jesus to a figure of the past. Moreover, it loses to view the unity

²⁰ Benedict XVI, General Audience of October 3, 2012 (w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20121003.html).

²¹ See Gal 2:20 and Eph 5:25.

²² Benedict, XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* §14 (trans. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007).

of the Scriptures and dissolves them into a series of discrete books from different historical epochs. But Benedict's overriding concern is not merely theoretical, but profoundly pastoral. He laments: "Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air."²³ He reiterates that concern in his second volume, stating that critical exegesis "is focused too much on the past for it to make possible a personal relationship with Jesus."²⁴ Such "intimate friendship and relationship" lies at the very heart of Christian faith; and obstacles to it, whether erected by abusive clerics or agnostic academics, severely wound the Body of Christ.

Echoing this concern, John Cavadini has critiqued biblical courses in Catholic colleges and even in seminaries for not fulfilling *Dei Verbum's* injunction that "the study of the Sacred Page is, as it were, the soul of theology" (§24). He writes: "There is almost nothing rarer than a course which actually studies the sacred page *as* the sacred page, that is, as inspired Scripture, rather than simply as a text, perhaps of special significance for Western culture and the Church, but yet simply a text to be studied just like any other textual artifact left to us from Antiquity."²⁵

What is most urgent, as Benedict XVI both asserts and undertakes in his *Jesus of Nazareth* volumes, is a Christological hermeneutic that is inspired and guided by the crucial confession of *Dei Verbum*: "Jesus Christ is the mediator and fullness of all revelation (§2) who "saves us from the darkness of sin and death and raises us to eternal life" (§4).

Furthermore, I contend that, beyond particular courses in Bible, there has been a disturbing neglect of *Dei Verbum* in some Catholic theological circles, as though the constitution's robust Christological affirmations prove embarrassing. The bitter fruit of such misremembering of *Dei Verbum* is a reductionist Christology in theological and pastoral circles, one in which Jesus is extolled as herald of the Kingdom and moral Teacher but in which the unique claims of the Tradition about his person and work are too often passed over in silence. A happy phrase of Origen admirably sums up New Testament faith when he confesses Jesus as *autobasileia*: the Kingdom in Person. But some in the Academy and even in parishes seem

²³ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xii.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, *Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), xvi.

²⁵ John C. Cavadini, Foreword to Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M.Cap., *Jesus Becoming Jesus: A Theological Interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), ix.

loath to pronounce a heartfelt “Amen!” to the claim.²⁶

When, shortly after Vatican II, I undertook graduate studies at Yale, one of my professors remarked sadly that he hoped that Catholic theology after the Council would not replicate in twenty years the mistakes it took Protestant theology two hundred years to make.²⁷ He meant, of course, the reductionisms of Liberal Protestantism (from Kant to Harnack and beyond) wherein Jesus is reduced to a sublime moral teacher, and religion to ethics. Sadly, in many ways he was prescient.

The classic exposition of the descent into Protestant Liberalism is, of course, H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Kingdom of God in America*, with its stark summation: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”²⁸

A primary manifestation of such Christological reductionism, as the Niebuhr quote vividly highlights, is this marginalization of the Cross. A fair amount of contemporary theological reflection upon the crucifixion of Jesus reads it solely as the punishment inflicted by an oppressive political-religious establishment upon a provocative threat to its power. When asked whether anything salvific transpired *on* the Cross, many would demur.

For liberal Christian theology, the salvific ministry of Jesus unfolded in his life of teaching and healing and social advocacy. But his death itself was only the consequence of his radical challenging of the “powers that be.” The more extreme advocates of liberation and feminist approaches to theology go so far as to savage theories of the atonement as evidence of heavenly parental “child abuse.” In so doing they render incomprehensible the Gospel narrative in both the Synoptics and John, where the Cross is the culmination of Jesus’s mission, summed up in the centurion’s cry—“Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39)—or the Johannine Jesus’s own testimony in his “It is consummated” (John 19:30).

The cruciform logic of Catholic liturgy and spirituality through the centuries is already patent in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, where he exults “in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been cruci-

²⁶ For a stimulating and suggestive example of the employment of a Christological hermeneutic in preaching, see Hans Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

²⁷ I have since discovered that Hans Frei may have been “channeling” Karl Barth (see Levering, *Introduction to Vatican II*, 202n82).

²⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1959), 193.

fied to me and I to the world" (Gal 6:14) and confesses that he has "been crucified with Christ" and now lives "by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). John Henry Newman rightly entitles one of his richest sermons: "The Cross of Christ the Measure of the World."²⁹

In her monumental study *The Crucifixion*, Fleming Rutledge has cogently shown how far the witness of the Great Tradition to Jesus, Lord and Savior, differs from the pale Nazarene of liberal imaginings. She writes: "The cross, incomparably vindicated by the resurrection, is the *novum*, the new factor in human experience, the definitive and world-changing act of God that makes the New Testament proclamation unique in all the world." She further insists that "the crucifixion is the touchstone of Christian authenticity, the unique feature by which everything else, including the resurrection, is given its true significance."³⁰

In sum, the Christological deficit of Liberalism leaves a Christian congregation bereft of its Lord, a headless body of believers that may poignantly echo Magdalene's lament: "They have taken the Lord and we do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:2). Absent Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Christian self-understanding inevitably succumbs to what Ratzinger has decried as "the dictatorship of relativism."³¹

I pass now to a third symptom of the theological-pastoral plight that I have been calling the "decapitated Body." I point here to a pronounced tendency to advocate and embrace a "Spirit monism." Let me briefly revert once again to personal history.

I have already mentioned pursuing graduate studies at Yale shortly after

²⁹ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, VI, 7 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 1239–1245. For an insightful perspective upon Newman's own quarrel with "Liberalism," see Cyril O'Regan, "John Henry Newman and the Argument of Holiness," in *Newman Studies Journal* 9, no. 1 (2012): 52–74.

³⁰ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 61, 71.

³¹ See the memorable homily he delivered at the Mass prior to the conclave of 2005 (www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html). Though speaking explicitly of Ernst Troeltsch, Matthew Levering clearly intends the following as a characterization of liberal theology, whether in its Protestant or Catholic guise: "Troeltsch historicizes Christianity and identifies its truth with the emergence of new forms of liberative praxis (political and economic movements). . . . These evolving forms are not rooted in or bound by an authoritative Word of God, dogma, or faith in redemption from sin and death won by Jesus Christ" (*The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction to his Trilogy* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019], 221).

the closing of the Council. 1968 became for myself and many the *annus horribilis* marked by the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and widespread political and social unrest. It also saw the long-delayed appearance of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, with the ensuing religious and theological turmoil it sparked.

My own theological interests became focused upon the theology of the Holy Spirit, which seemed a neglected and promising area of research and prayerful exploration. One fruit of this pondering was the article "Holy Spirit," which appeared in *The New Dictionary of Theology*.³²

Yet, even while working on the article, I was becoming increasingly aware of a growing allergy among some at making explicit appeal to the name of Jesus Christ. In Catholic college and university settings one became sadly accustomed to public events where a "generic brands" deity was invoked, lest any take offense at explicitly Christian prayer. But also at meetings of Catholic theologians it seemed the vogue to invoke an often anonymous Spirit that, as one participant put it, allows for "more wiggle room."

A small but telling indication for me was the (unwitting, careless, deliberate?) misremembering of the opening of *Lumen Gentium*. Countless times the following, hugely important sentence was cited in articles and presentation. "The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humankind" (§1). More often than not, however, the crucial "in Christ" was omitted from the quote, without even the courtesy of providing ellipses!

Cyril O'Regan's fine study of von Balthasar's engagement with philosophical modernity speaks of philosophical modernity's "Christological Derailment." Led by Hegel and his epigones, Christian thinkers offered a "rinsed rendition of Christ." They "fundamentally reversed the order of reference, and made Christ refer to the Spirit rather than the Spirit to Christ." The result is one that has haunted Protestant Liberalism for two hundred years. "The community divests itself of the concrete particularity of Christ, and in its reference to Spirit concludes in abolishing transcendence altogether. Through pneumatic displacement the community's memory of Christ becomes self-referential."³³

The "rinsed rendition of Christ" of Protestant Liberal theology has too

³² Robert P. Imbelli, "Holy Spirit," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 474–89.

³³ Cyril O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar's Response to Philosophical Modernity*, vol. 1, *Hegel* (New York: Crossroad, 2014), 200.

often been copied in the decapitated Body presented in some quarters of contemporary Catholicism. This constitutes not only a misremembering of the Council, but a traducing of the New Testament itself.

John Henry Newman surely represents the more authoritative and faithful witness. In one of his Anglican sermons he declares: “The Holy Spirit causes, faith welcomes, the indwelling of Christ in the heart. Thus the Holy Spirit does not take the place of Christ in the soul, but secures that place to Christ.”³⁴ And Congar, who did so much to promote the renewal of the theology of the Holy Spirit in the Western Church, insisted: “The vigor of a lived pneumatology is to be found in Christology: there is only one body which the Spirit builds up and quickens, and that is the body of Christ.”³⁵ In Gospel truth, without its Head there is simply no Body.

This leads, finally, to the fourth temptation which, in effect, sunders Jesus from his Body, the Church: the disjunction of the “doctrinal” from the “pastoral” that is so frequently a mark of Catholic discourse today. Indeed, some go so far as to contend that a new “pastoral paradigm,” purportedly inspired by the magisterium of Pope Francis, is to replace the “doctrinal paradigm” that may have served the Church in the past, but, in the present historical and cultural context, no longer authentically reflects the movement of the Spirit.³⁶

Already in 1985, the extraordinary synod convened to celebrate and reflect upon the twentieth anniversary of the close of Vatican II had strongly affirmed: “It is not licit to separate the pastoral character from the doctrinal vigor of the documents.” Even a cursory perusal of the Constitutions of the Council reveals how intimately connected the two perspectives are, whether in *Lumen Gentium* or in *Gaudium et Spes*. To separate them is to dissect a living whole.

But the insidious temptation is not a new one. In the darkest days of World War II, with half of France under Nazi occupation, Henri de Lubac wrote a passionate essay deploring just such a sundering—for it bore lethal repercussions. He passionately affirmed the inextricable nexus between

³⁴ John Henry Newman, “The Spiritual Presence of Christ in the Church,” *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, VI, 10 (p. 1265–66).

³⁵ Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, trans. David Smith (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 6. I myself sought to outline an approach that did justice to the work of God’s “two hands” in “The New Adam and Life-giving Spirit: the Paschal Pattern of Spirit Christology,” *Communio* 25, no. 2 (1998): 233–52.

³⁶ For a recent instance, see George Dennis O’Brien, “The Risks of History: Does the Church Do Paradigm Shift?,” *Commonweal*, May 3, 2019, 8–10, and my own response, “The Risks of Disjunction,” *Commonweal*, June 4, 2019, 4.

doctrine and practice, between truth and love. And he showed their unity by leading them both to their foundation in the Mystery of Jesus Christ: hence a *re-ductio in Mysterium Christi*!

Both Christian doctrine and Christian practice have their unique Source in the Mystery of Jesus Christ, the generative Dogma of the Great Tradition. De Lubac writes:

No more, in fact, than one could dissociate the revealed truths from the very Person of the Revealer could one conceive a just and complete idea of the transcendent newness of Christianity if one did not see that in this Person of Christ, such as the Apostles already show him to us and such as the Church never ceases to contemplate and reproduce him, the reality of Charity and the truth of Dogma are indissolubly united, Charity constituting the reality of this Dogma, as this Dogma itself constitutes the truth of this Charity.³⁷

Nicholas Healy expresses this conviction well: “Before dogma is something the Church formulates, dogma is something Christ himself is; dogma is first and foremost Christ himself as incarnate Word and enfleshed truth.”³⁸

Christian doctrine, therefore, is the mystagogic unfolding “of God’s mystery, of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge: (Col 2:2–3). And the foundational Christian practice is the realization (in the strong sense Newman gives the word) of the mystery “which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). It is being configured to Christ, “Christification.” To quote de Lubac once again: “It is a matter of a spiritual life that makes the mystery of Christ real in each Christian, member of the Body of Christ.”³⁹

The four tendencies/temptations outlined above literally conspire to foster, wittingly or not, the apostasy of a Headless Body. For, as Pope Francis vividly proclaimed in his very first homily to the cardinals after his election: “If we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord.” And Francis continued: “When we journey without the Cross, when we

³⁷ Henri de Lubac, “The Light of Christ,” in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash with foreword by Michel Sales (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 216.

³⁸ Nicholas J. Healy Jr., “Henri de Lubac on the Development of Dogma,” *Communio* 44, no. 4 (2017): 679. See also the fine article of José Granados, “The Synergy of Doctrine and Life,” *Communio* 43, no. 1 (2016): 104–22, drawing upon Irenaeus, Augustine, and Aquinas.

³⁹ De Lubac, “The Light of Christ,” 215n33.

build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly: we may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord.⁴⁰ In truth, without Jesus Christ and his Paschal Mystery at its center the Church goes tragically astray. It lapses into apostasy.

Toward Re-Sourcement

I have indicated both in this essay and in *Rekindling the Christic Imagination* my conviction that the “Way Forward” is to undertake a creative re-appropriation of the Vatican II constitutions in their full Christological concentration. This re-appropriation must, of course, be the responsibility of many. It will undoubtedly require theological and spiritual acumen, creative fidelity, and courageous, persevering commitment.

As one ages, a certain “simplification” inevitably sets in (hopefully not one that is merely “simplistic”). I am more and more convinced that in reading the New Testament and the Fathers (the “ressourcement” that inspired so many of the theologians at Vatican II) a governing pattern, a “depth grammar,” if you will, unmistakably emerges. It underlies the diverse writings in their various modes and manners. I call it the pattern of “*novum*/transformation.”⁴¹ Irenaeus of Lyons provides a succinct summary when he exclaims of Christ: “*Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens*”—“He brought all newness by bringing himself!”⁴²

In face of Liberalism’s “rinsed Christology” that results in a Body deprived of a defining relation to the living and life-giving Presence of its risen, ascended Lord, it is imperative for Catholic life and theology to witness, in word and deed, to the absolute newness and transformative mission of Jesus Christ. I would briefly like to call upon two figures who, in my view, articulate and embody such conviction. Rowan Williams and Jeremy Driscoll can serve the Church as guides and, indeed, mystagogues on our way forward.

Creative fidelity is on ample display in Rowan Williams’ recent book *Christ The Heart of Creation*. There Williams writes: “The central themes of classical Christology are closely bound up with the doctrine of *Christ’s*

⁴⁰ w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130314_omelia-cardinali.html.

⁴¹ I first discussed it at length in the introduction to *Handing on the Faith: The Church’s Mission and Challenge*, ed. Robert P. Imbelli, The Church in the 21st Century (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 1–9.

⁴² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses*, 4.34.1. This quote serves as the leitmotif for de Lubac’s “The Light of Christ,” and indeed for the entire volume *Theology in History* (see note 37).

Headship: that is, to acknowledge the divine life of the Word at work in Jesus is the foundation of thinking of the community of believers as bound together with him in a relation that is unlike any other.⁴³ He further asserts: "This finite life that is Jesus' enacts the infinite in such a way that its loving agency permeates and transfigures the lives of those touched by it, and so transfigures the meanings of the entire material world."⁴⁴ Finally, he expresses a hope and presents a challenge: "Perhaps these pages will serve to prompt some at least to look harder and longer at the classical shape of incarnational teaching, to see how it is in this light that we see light on the entire creaturely landscape which we inhabit, and which we are called in and with Christ to transform."⁴⁵ The grammar of newness/transformation clearly structures Williams's work.

Let me underscore some elements of this "incarnational teaching" that Williams highlights. He privileges the Headship of Jesus so that it becomes central to his Christological vision. The risen and ascended Jesus is not only "the first-born from the dead"; he is thereby constituted "Head of the Body the Church," so that "in everything he might be pre-eminent" (Col 1:18).

By his Headship Jesus is bound intimately to the members of his Body "in a relation that is unlike any other," a relation whereby his "loving agency permeates and transfigures the lives of those touched by it." A prime way that Williams ponders and explores the *novum* of Christianity is from the standpoint of relationality. Jesus Christ, the "new Adam," is the progenitor of a new grace-endowed network of transfigured relations that image the mutual relations that are the very life of the tri-personal God.

Hence, not only does the Christic *novum* inspire a Christological hermeneutic of the Scriptures. It requires a Christological hermeneutic of reality itself. It signals a Christological ontology whose *Magna Carta* could well be the verse from the Christological hymn of Colossians: "He

⁴³ Rowan Williams, *Christ The Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 249 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁴ Williams, *Christ The Heart of Creation*, 251

⁴⁵ Williams, *Christ The Heart of Creation*, 254. I suggest that too little noted in the discussion of Charles Taylor's monumental *A Secular Age* has been his sense of the grave human and spiritual deficiencies of modernity and the task incumbent upon Christians. He writes: "[Christians] live in a world where objectification and excarnation reign, where death undermines meaning We have to struggle to recover a sense of what the Incarnation can mean" (*A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007], 753). Rowan Williams's book is a profound meditation on what the Incarnation means.

is before all things and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17).⁴⁶ All things (the New Testament's *ta panta*) are related to him and for him. And all find their fulfillment in him (Eph 1:23).

The divine energies emanating from the risen, ascended Lord work the transfiguration, the *Christification*, of those united to him in faith and in love and, through them, of the whole created order.⁴⁷ I am evermore persuaded, in this regard, that it is a theological and pastoral imperative to recover the significance and implications of the Ascension of Jesus Christ, to rescue the feast that celebrates his Ascension from its "orphan" status (in danger of losing even its proper liturgical placement) so that it might foster a renewed appreciation of Christ's Ascension as the very *telos* of the Incarnation and the pole star of incarnational faith.⁴⁸

As these last remarks indicate, the way forward, the Christic re-Sourcement of Catholic life and theology, must entail more than theoretical appropriation (however necessary). It must, even more crucially, promote and sustain a personal and communal realization of the unique Headship of Jesus Christ and disciples' intimate and life-giving relation to him. As the collect for the Feast of the Ascension prays: "The Ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation and, where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope." No hint of a "decapitated body" here!

Thus, to complement Williams's more theoretical insights, I draw upon the liturgical-pastoral reflections of Jeremy Driscoll. In his book *Awesome Glory*, Abbot Driscoll offers, among other riches, a penetrating meditation upon the link between the body of Jesus and that of his disciples, both his original and contemporary disciples. Jesus's charismatic bodily presence

⁴⁶ I suggest that one of the speculative tasks pressing upon Catholic theologians is to further elaborate a "relational ontology." For some preliminary observations see Robert P. Imbelli, "The Heart Has its Reasons: Giving an Account of the Hope that Is in Us," in *Handing on the Faith: College Theology Society Annual Volume 59*, ed. Matthew Louis Sutton and William L. Portier, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 21–42, esp. 34–37.

⁴⁷ Another neglected aspect of Charles Taylor's appreciative-critical engagement with secularity is his appeal to the Eastern Christian understanding of *theosis* to challenge modernity's truncated anthropology. He speaks of *theosis* as "the further greater transformation which Christian faith holds out" (*A Secular Age*, 737). And the New Testament reveals that the form of *theosis* is Christic.

⁴⁸ See the rich reflections in Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), chapter 4 ("The Ascension and the Eternal Liturgy"). I have offered some considerations in Robert P. Imbelli, "Sursum Corda: Ascension Theology and Spirituality," in "*Sufficit Gratia Mea*": *Studi Offerti al Cardinale Angelo Amato*, ed. Manlio Sodi (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 359–68.

summoned and apprenticed a body of disciples. His crucified body challenged the dispirited body of disciples. His transformed resurrected body initiated a body of disciples on the way of transformation. The grammar of newness/transformation permeates Driscoll's book. He writes that the resurrected and ascended body of Jesus is "an event of an entirely new order": It involves space and time, it involves *bodies*; but it pulls space and time and *bodies* into a new realm, a realm which establishes its own terms of how it can be known.⁴⁹ We can know it only in the Body of Christ which is the Church, as we are being ever more fully incorporated into the new reality.

An acute realization evident in Williams's theology and Driscoll's liturgical spirituality and practice is what I call "somatic relationality." Williams has for many years spoken and written forcefully of our radical inter-dependence, how we are implicated (literally "folded into") one another, both for good and ill. And Driscoll, drawing upon Ephesians, insists: "Christ's ascension involves gifts flowing out from him that build us all into one body. It appears to be a progressive process that is reaching toward all of us somehow being built up and taken together into what [Paul] calls 'the full stature of Christ.'"⁵⁰

What Driscoll especially accents and powerfully illustrates is how the new life in Jesus Christ receives its fullest actualization in the celebration of the Eucharist. How our "full, conscious, and active participation" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* §14) is nothing less than the joyful celebration of the *novum* who is Christ the Head and the generous surrender to the transforming work of the Spirit: our ongoing incorporation into Christ. The Eucharist manifests and enables the new relational life in Christ: a life all-encompassing and never-ending.

Thus, both Williams and Driscoll, in their vision and ministry, provide a powerful counter to "exarnation"—that fear of and flight from the flesh with its fragility and mortality—that Charles Taylor finds pervasive in our "enlightened" secular age. Moreover, contrary to the "buffered self" of modernity that strives to protect itself against the incursions of others, Williams and Driscoll celebrate the bodily self, immersed in a polymorphous web of relations. They see that the decisive issue is whether those relations (both among humans and with the natural environment) are life-giving or death-dealing—whether they are being transfigured in Christ.

In their writings both notably stress the theme of "transformation"

⁴⁹ Driscoll, *Awesome Glory*, 27 (emphasis original).

⁵⁰ Driscoll, *Awesome Glory*, 132.

and “transfiguration.” They are painfully aware of the depth of human need and hence the imperative of redemption, the at-onement that only the Cross and Resurrection of Christ can accomplish. They keenly perceive that transformation transpires in community and is for the sake of communion. Together they bear remarkable testimony to the real and transforming Presence of Jesus Christ, who is Head of the Body and the very heart of creation.

Conclusion

The celebration of the Eucharist, which proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes, is the privileged locus where somatic relatedness and transformation, friendship and communion find their font and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Head of the Body. To elucidate the grammar of *novum*/transformation, as I maintain Williams and Driscoll cogently do, does not obviate the urgent need for a mystagogic *ars celebrandi*. However, it discloses the *res* that must inform, govern, and guide our liturgical celebrations if they are to “realize” (in Newman’s pregnant sense) the true worship of the Head and the authentic participation of the Body.

The transformative thrust of the Eucharistic mystery receives striking expression in Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* in words that Williams and Driscoll would surely second. Let the closing words, then, be those of Francis . . . and Benedict:

The Lord chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living center of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. . . . In the bread of the Eucharist “creation is projected toward divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards unification with the Creator himself.”⁵¹

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⁵¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home *Laudato Si’* §236 (w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html; the internal quote is from a Corpus Christi homily of Benedict XVI).