

The Church, the Modern World, and the Spirit of Vatican II¹

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IN THE LATE SUMMER of 1977, I made my way to New Haven, Connecticut, not yet twenty-two years old and afire to study theology at Yale Divinity School. At that innocent dawn of my theological life I was surprised to discover that not everybody at YDS shared my passion for theology. People had other reasons for going to seminary besides wanting to read more Augustine and Luther, to say nothing of more Kant and Hegel. “If you’re interested in that sort of thing,” I was advised, “take Lindbeck.” I did.

The course George Lindbeck offered that term was “Comparative Doctrine,” which focused on the historic doctrinal disagreements among Christians. The Second Vatican Council featured heavily in the course. Lindbeck, I learned, had been an official Protestant observer at Vatican II, which had concluded only a dozen years before. As I found out a good deal later, he had in fact been much involved in the complex goings on at the Council through all four of its “periods,” from its surprising opening sessions in the fall of 1962 through to its conclusion in 1965. His main interest in “Comparative Doctrine,” as it turned out, was not simply the differences of doctrine among Christians, but their possible resolution, especially those between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. This was not my first taste of Vatican II—that had come in an undergraduate church

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history course—but it was my first exposure to the difference the recently concluded ecumenical Council might make to the thought of theologians and in the lives of Christians, not least those outside the Roman Catholic Church. At the time I was one of the interested outsiders, and I listened.

There is a conventional narrative about Vatican II, a dramatic story about what happened at the Council and the impact it had. This story was already current in my theological youth. In its simplest form, the standard narrative goes like this. With a clarity he himself attributed to an unanticipated illumination of the Holy Spirit, the newly elected Pope John XXIII announced in early 1959 that he intended to summon an ecumenical council. The coming council, he insisted, was to have three purposes: the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the Catholic Church, the updating of the Church's outlook and institutions so as to make her proclamation of the Gospel more effective in the modern world, and ecumenical reconciliation with non-Catholic Christians. Inevitably, the massive work of preparing for the council fell mainly to officials of the Roman Curia, who were uniformly entrenched traditionalists and designed a council that would produce none of the changes the Pope hoped to see. Indeed they aimed, in drawing up the *schemata* that would be discussed by the council fathers, at raising to the level of permanently binding Catholic doctrine the broad rejection of modern developments in biblical scholarship and theology that had been the norm in Rome since the modernist crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century. But in the dramatic opening sessions of the Council in the fall of 1962, the assembled bishops and other leaders of the Catholic Church, headed by those from Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, refused to follow the agenda set by the traditionalist Curia, repudiated their reactionary *schemata*, and unexpectedly showed themselves to be, in the majority, progressives open to John XXIII's agenda of sweeping pastoral renewal.

All was not smooth sailing from there on out. Pope John died in the summer of 1963, and the curial traditionalists retained their powerful positions. But John's successor, Paul VI, largely embraced the progressive intentions of his predecessor and of the Conciliar majority. The result, by the time of the Council's conclusion a little more than fifty years ago, was the irreversible triumph of a progressive Catholicism open to the modern world. At least for a time, traditionalist elements would remain in the Church, hoping to blunt, if not roll back entirely, the impact of the progressive victory. But they

had, and always would have, the weight of this ecumenical Council against them.

This story has some truth to it, along with more than a little wishful thinking. Narratives do not get to be standard unless there is a grain of truth in them. That Vatican II was a triumph of progressives over traditionalists in the Catholic Church is right as far as it goes. The important question is what the progressives actually won—what the Council actually achieved—and why.

Not long after Paul VI brought the Second Vatican Council to its solemn conclusion on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1965, Jacques Maritain published *The Peasant of the Garonne*. The great Catholic philosopher, by then well into his eighties, subtitled his book *An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*. He began, however, not with questioning, but “in profound thanksgiving for everything the Council has decreed and accomplished.”

To the recently concluded Council we owe a ringing affirmation of the dignity and rights of the human person and of true human freedom—not least religious freedom. Equally, we owe to the Council an abundance of new light on “the sacred treasures of Catholic doctrine” concerning the Church and divine revelation. The Council has taught us to treat every human being as “an invaluable gift” from God, as truly our brothers whether they are near or far from the fullness of truth known to the Catholic Church—whether they are non-Catholic Christians, the adherents of non-Christian religions, or indeed, hardened atheists. It has decisively repudiated anti-Semitism and insisted on God’s special love for the Jewish people. It has affirmed and blessed with unprecedented depth and clarity the mission of the laity of Christ’s Church. And Vatican II “recognizes more explicitly than ever the value, beauty, and dignity of this world.” For this and much more, for a veritable torrent of beneficial and authoritative teaching, every faithful Catholic should offer thanks to God.

The *teaching* of Vatican II, enshrined in the sixteen substantial documents it produced, Maritain embraced without reservation. But the *event* of the Council was, in his eyes, laced with ambiguity. It had unleashed vast pent-up longings both inside and outside the Church. Some of these were forces for great good, but in others lay the potential for great evil. Chief among the latter was the astonishing readiness of some Catholics, in the name of being up to date, to “kneel before the world.” The Council eloquently expressed the truth that this world is God’s good and beautiful creation, but the Council did not forget that at present this world is also, as Scripture

unsparingly teaches, “in the power of the evil one” (1 John. 5:19). Theologians and exegetes in particular seemed willing to bend the knee. In those days, virtually all Catholic theologians were priests. We are thus treated to the spectacle, Maritain acidly observed, of priests “who boast of no longer genuflecting before the tabernacle” but happily bend the knee to the manifold spirits of this passing world. The damage this can do to the Church, to her liturgy, to her teaching, and above all to the yearning for holiness—which always requires renunciation of the *goods* of this world for love of the Good who infinitely transcends this world—is beyond calculation.

The Peasant of the Garonne was widely read and counted among its admirers François Mauriac, Julien Green, and Charles de Gaulle. Theologians, though, were mostly dismissive. Maritain’s talk of a “crisis” in Catholicism evident even before Vatican II was over seemed wholly out of touch with the Council’s great success at bringing about deep changes Maritain himself, as much as anyone, had long passionately advocated. Obviously the octogenarian philosopher mistook the dubious claims of a few fringe figures (like Teilhard de Chardin) for influential trends in the post-Conciliar Church, an ominous aspect of what the progressive victory had let loose. More than one reader wondered whether dementia had set in.

A decade after the Council’s conclusion, though, a good number of its participants had come to share Maritain’s worries, including some who had previously been critics of the now departed “peasant.” George Lindbeck was among those who saw, and even from outside the Church worried over, a serious crisis in post-Conciliar Catholicism. The shortcomings of the standard narrative were increasingly plain to see, even if many refused (and still refuse) to take notice. By the time I took his course, Lindbeck had written that “the process of reforming popular Catholicism started by the Council is draining it of its communal, cultural, and religious substance.” Though as a Protestant theologian he was naturally inclined to give Catholic progressives the benefit of the doubt, Lindbeck nonetheless found himself appalled by the extent to which the progressives “appealed to the Council to justify their own loss of faith, their mindless capitulation to *modernitas*, their devious and unacknowledged departures from what is essential, not only to the Roman tradition, but to Christianity itself.”

The French Jesuit Henri de Lubac was among the most influential theologians at Vatican II. Like his younger Dominican compatriot Yves Congar, de Lubac had been appointed by John XXIII to the

preparatory commission for the Council, despite the fact that both of them had been very much under a cloud in Rome throughout the 1950s. Also like Congar, de Lubac was scathing about what he saw as the theological backwardness and intellectual mediocrity of the curial officials with whom he had to work in preparation for the Council, and on whose views he was able to have little positive effect. Both were deeply gratified at the unexpected openness of the Council to meaningful change in the face of curial resistance and saw in this the gracious hand of providence. But by the last years of the Council—1964 and 1965—de Lubac was already worried about where things were going.

During these two years, most of the influential texts of the Council were forged into their final form: the Constitutions on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), divine revelation (*Dei Verbum*), and the Church in the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*), along with the decree on ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) and the declarations on religious liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*) and on the Church and non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*). The intense debate on these documents, even more behind the scenes than in the aula of St. Peter's, made all too clear, de Lubac observed in his diary, that the "progressive" majority was in fact deeply divided. The theologians at the Council, almost as numerous as the bishops they were there to advise, may have been mostly "progressives" by 1964, but they had very different ideas about what the Church and her teaching ought to look like after the Council. As for the bishops, de Lubac wondered how many of them really understood the texts they were voting to approve and what it would take to implement their teaching.

The divisions within the Council were especially clear in the fierce debates about "Schema XIII," which eventually became the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World approved by the Council the day before it ended. To de Lubac and others, drafts of this document seemed like little more than laundry lists of political and social desiderata, lacking what he called "apostolic boldness": the evangelical spirit essential for genuinely Christian engagement with the world. Indeed, de Lubac worried, the support Schema XIII was receiving from some of the bishops and theologians at the Council would leave the Church vulnerable to an uncritical embrace of the world, and yet more seriously to mistaking its own growing temptation to worldliness for apostolic and missionary zeal. He was among those who worked hard to place the "pastoral constitution" on a firm doctrinal, and especially Christological and eschatological, footing

(Joseph Ratzinger, then a professor in his mid-thirties, was another).

They succeeded, but by this time it was already clear that the standard narrative was not even true at the time of the Council itself, let alone up to our present hour. Having a common enemy in a relative handful of Roman theologians and traditionalist bishops did not unite the Council into a single and shared progressive intention. Still less did the episcopal and theological majority at Vatican II shape a unified reception of the Council after it was over. The divisions already in evidence before 1965 and the widely acknowledged crisis of the years that followed were not the result of a revanchist minority's ongoing effort to thwart the enlightened aims of the progressive majority. They bespoke deep conflict among the majority itself—all those who welcomed the Council and strove to implement its teaching—about what it really means for the Church to be “updated” and open to the world.

Yet, the crisis has passed and the Council has largely succeeded in bringing about the good John XXIII envisioned when he decided to call for it, the faithful renewal of the Church that was the deep hope many of the participants brought with them to Rome in 1962. Fifty years on, this is the single most salient fact about Vatican II, out of all the things that could rightly be said of the Council and its effects. When he addressed the Council on its opening day, Pope John was clear about its aim: to transmit Catholic doctrine to the modern world “pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion.” This saving patrimony, he observed with broad Petrine understatement, “is not well received by all.” Therefore, our duty, he implored the Council fathers, “is not only to guard this precious treasure, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our age demands of us, pursuing thus the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries.”

In Pope John's frequently remembered image, the time had come to open the windows of the Church and let the winds of the modern world blow in. No half measure would be enough. Nothing less than an ecumenical council was needed for the Church to do what now needed to be done. John XXIII knew, as did his successor Paul VI, that, along with goods the Church should welcome, much that was meaningless, banal, and distracting would come in through the open windows, and some that was truly evil. Relying on “twenty centuries” of Catholic doctrine and tradition, the Council's responsibility was to give pastoral teaching that would enable the Church of “our age” to distinguish what was good in the modern world from what

was indifferent, or worse, and to make right use of the good while firmly rejecting the bad.

To a remarkable extent, this has in fact happened. Much surely remains to be done so that the inestimable riches of the Catholic tradition become more visibly present in the day-to-day life of the Church. Nonetheless, the event of the Council has lost much of its ambiguity for the Catholic Church, while the teaching of the Council has gradually but definitely taken root. It was hardly inevitable that this should have happened. Looked at from the midst of the chaos of around 1975, it might well have seemed unlikely that it would ever happen. In order to understand why things turned out as well as they did, we need to abandon the standard narrative, which narrows everything about the Council down to mid-twentieth century conflicts between traditionalists and progressives. A more plausible story about Vatican II has to locate the Council in the larger modern history of Catholicism.

For the Catholic Church, the basic fact about modernity, the event with an impact that exceeded any other, was not the rise of modern science or the emergence of historical criticism, but the French Revolution. The Revolution wanted to destroy the Catholic Church in France: to nationalize it, sever its ties with Rome, and turn it into a wholly owned and docile subsidiary of the new French republic. Resistance was met with widespread exile, imprisonment, and slaughter. Thousands of priests, nuns, and laypeople were murdered for their failure to comply with the new “liberty” of France, many of them publicly beheaded. The lands of the Church throughout France were confiscated and sold off, religious orders were banned, churches were turned into temples of reason, the crucifix replaced on occasion with a bust of Jean Marat, and the French would now count their days and years not from the birth of Christ, but from the birth of the Revolution. With varying degrees of intensity, the Revolution’s violence against the Church would be repeated again and again in Europe over the next two hundred years.

In France the worst of the destruction passed with the Reign of Terror, and some of the damage began to be repaired. But Napoleon soon sought to spread the Revolution’s control of the Church across the continent in the wake of his European conquests. He secularized Church lands and institutions in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere and continually pressured the Church to cede her independence in spiritual as well as temporal matters. One Pope, Pius VI, died a prisoner of the French army in 1799, and his successor, Pius VII, lived for five

years as Napoleon's captive. Bonaparte hoped that fear and despair would compel the aging Benedictine Pope to give in to the spirit of the times, and yield up the Church to the demands of the Revolution. He did not, and "the old imbecile," as Napoleon called him, lived to see Bonaparte brought low and die in exile, reconciled to the Church by a chaplain Pius himself had sent to St. Helena.

In a sense, the Revolution was a blessing for the Catholic Church. By sweeping away the *ancien régime*, the Jacobins and their successors unwittingly took a long first step toward freeing the Church from the often suffocating embrace of Catholic monarchs who thought they, and not the pope and the bishops, should be in charge of Catholicism in their country or empire. The French Revolution demolished the alliance of throne and altar that had characterized Catholic Christendom for a thousand years. That alliance had always been troubled and uneasy, but France found a radical solution: destroy the throne. Others would adopt the same remedy or have it imposed upon them, and by the end of the long nineteenth century, in 1918, the ancient Catholic monarchies of Europe would all be gone. Especially at Vatican I and in the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878–1903), the Catholic Church, in fact, embraced this epochal change and began to work out in earnest a new, genuinely post-Constantinian teaching on the relation of Church, state, and civil society, a teaching above all concerned to secure the freedom and independence of the Church from the modern state.

The Revolution tried to demolish altar as well as throne, but the Church proved more resistant and more durable than any of the monarchies of Europe. The Revolution did, however, establish secularism (or "anti-clericalism," *laïcité*) as a basic feature of European politics and culture—a fundamental element of what had come to see itself as enlightened modernity. The secularism first institutionalized in Europe by the French Revolution never aimed simply at a live-and-let-live separation of church and state, a simple break with the early modern idea that a coherent society requires a single religious confession—*cuius regio, eius religio*. It was, and is, a political and social program that aims to refashion society from the ground up. It wants a veritable transvaluation of values, a reorientation of human loves that exalts above all the things of this world. From the beginning, this aggressive secularism has—rightly—seen the Catholic Church, and especially its asceticism, its passionate love of goods beyond this world, as the chief enemy of what it calls progress. The Church is the obstacle that above all must be surmounted, and where necessary

destroyed, if human beings are to love as they ought, if love, as secularism conceives it, is to win.

Seventy-five years after the French Revolution, Pope Pius IX grasped very clearly the nature of this secularism and the grave threat it poses to the Church. Casting off religion and true justice, the Pope argued, “this unhappy age” relentlessly seeks a selfish materialist society “with no other end than obtaining and amassing wealth,” a society that “follows no other law in its actions except the unchastened desire of ministering to its own pleasure and interests.” As the architects of this secular society well knew, it could be built only by wresting from the Church control over two basic social institutions: marriage and the education of the young. The Church, Pius insisted, could only resist as well as she was able the many encroachments on her traditional rights over marriage and education already then underway.

Even at the time, Pius IX was derided for being so retrograde as to say that the pope ought not, indeed could not, “reconcile himself to progress, liberalism and modern civilization.” A hundred and fifty years later, though, it is hard to read his description of emerging Western secularism as anything but prophecy fulfilled. There really ought to be little wonder that the Catholic Church would, for the better part of two centuries, see great caution where possible and open resistance where necessary as the rule for her engagement with modernity—political, cultural, intellectual, and otherwise. By the time of Pius IX, the Church already had deep experience of modernity’s destructiveness, much of it deliberate. It would be absurd to expect the Church and the papacy, in this post-Revolutionary world, to welcome the political forces of modernity and the philosophies that support them as benign, let alone benevolent.

Nonetheless a reckoning with modernity clearly lay in the future, and for two basic reasons. First, secular political arrangements of the sort introduced by the French Revolution became, if by fits and starts, pervasive in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With these, of course, came myriad cultural and intellectual changes. Some of these political and cultural shifts were moderately favorable to the Catholic Church (and, depending on the location, to other forms of Christianity), others less so, and some murderously hostile. It was, in any case, increasingly unrealistic to hope, as some Catholics did well into the twentieth century, for a return to traditional Catholic societies in Europe under the leadership of Catholic princes. The Church needed deep clarity about her relationship to this new political and

intellectual world, and this required the same clarity about her own identity and mission, given the radically changed public circumstances in which she now lived.

Second, modernity brought with it great goods, both political and intellectual. More precisely, modernity saw the emergence of potent but ambiguous political and intellectual realities. Take, to recall two quite different examples, religious freedom (with its attendant disestablishment of the Church) and medical technology. In these lay the potential for tremendous benefit for the Church and for the societies she inhabited. Given the Church's deep and ancient impulse to embrace truth and goodness wherever she finds it, the benefits of modernity had to be sought out and assimilated by Catholicism. But there was potential in these modern realities for great harm as well. Everything depended on the Church, when the time had arrived, truly coming to grips with modernity on her own terms, and not on the terms modernity inevitably sought to impose. Only in this way could the good in modernity rightly be discerned from the irrelevant and the genuinely evil, the good uses of what modernity had wrought from the distracting and the truly destructive. To borrow a phrase the Council itself would use in another connection, the Church could rightly come to terms with modernity only by "searching her own mystery." The centrality of ecclesiology at Vatican II was not accidental, but in the nature of the case.

John XXIII's inspiration was simply to have discerned that the time had come for the Church's decisive reckoning with modernity. It was not too soon. The Church had lived amidst the manifold intellectual and political realities of the modern world long enough to decide effectively what could be assimilated and what should not. And it was not too late. The Church, as Benedict XVI would later say, "was still strong enough at that time." Her grip on her own doctrinal, moral, and devotional traditions remained deep and wide enough for a sweeping pastoral "update" in the midst of modernity, a renewal that would still firmly adhere to and embody those authentic Catholic traditions.

By disposition and training, John XXIII was a thoroughgoing traditionalist. Paul VI was the real reforming Pope of the Council who gently guided it through many perils to a successful conclusion. John had seen the need and the time—that the Church's problems needed to be confronted now and could be handled in no other way than by an ecumenical council. He entrusted the Council to the fathers, and most of them came to share his vision. The time was now

right for a fearless renewal of the Church, precisely as the guardian of that “precious treasure” entrusted to her by Christ, and the Council fathers committed themselves to the long labor of making that vision a reality. So, in particular, did John’s successors in the Chair of Peter. This, and not the much ballyhooed triumph of “progress” over “tradition,” was the real “spirit of Vatican II.”

That Pope John’s discernment was correct does not make it any less bold, indeed audacious. It, as well as the Council’s embrace of it, was an astonishing act of faith in the Holy Spirit’s unfailing guidance of the Church. A true reckoning with modernity, the banal and the destructive as well as the good, meant deliberately steering the barque of Peter for a long sail on turbulent seas. Perhaps inevitably, the ship listed to port for a time, but she sailed on, gradually righted herself, and now allows us to look back with some clarity on where we have come.

When, in the summer of 1960, Yves Congar began what was to become his long personal journal of Vatican II, he worried that “the Council has come twenty five years too soon.” An odd judgment, on the face of it. Congar had been on the blunt end of the potent anti-modernist discipline by which, in the first half of the twentieth century, the Church sought to regulate her interaction with the modern world. One might have expected Congar, for whom the Council entailed a personal liberation from that discipline, to have said it could not come soon enough. He worried, though, that the good fruits of modernity, particularly in biblical studies and theology, had not taken deep enough root in the Church, especially among the episcopate, and that the Council would only frustrate the pent-up longings of the Catholic world.

Congar became not only an especially influential *peritus* at the Council, but perhaps its most consistent theological defender in the decades that followed, although I do not know whether he ever explicitly revised that earlier judgment. Had the Council in fact been put off for a quarter century or more, there is good reason to think that it would not have borne nearly so much good fruit, but would instead have come too late.

As John XXIII and Paul VI (but not, it seems, the Congar of 1960) saw very clearly, when the windows are opened, fresh air is hardly all that comes in. The rigorous anti-modernism of the decades before Vatican II, however needed it may have been for a time, tried to let the winds of modernity into the Church only one purified breeze at a time. In 1960 it was increasingly evident, not least to people

like Congar, that this anti-modernist discipline had become deeply ineffective at coping with the flood of social, cultural, and intellectual forces that confronted the Church. Had this regime continued while modernity—the bad along with the good—continued to take root among Catholics unguided by the actions and decisions of an ecumenical council, the flood might simply have broken in on the Church willy-nilly, sweeping away the precious treasure Congar loved along with the anti-modernist regime he detested.

Vatican II set Catholicism on a turbulent course for decades to come, but it probably saved the Catholic Church from something far worse: an uncontained explosion on the scale of the Protestant Reformation. Catholics who are inclined to dismay over the lingering effects of the post-Conciliar chaos (including me, at least some of the time) should remember this. To take one case in point: the desire for liturgical reform, above all Mass in the vernacular, was widespread among the clergy, and to some extent among the laity as well, in the decades before Vatican II. Pius XII had already taken preliminary steps in this direction; it was not simply the interest of a few cutting-edge liturgical scholars. Without Vatican II, the movement for the reform of Catholic worship might have ended in schism or, short of that, in an ongoing liturgical chaos within the Church that would have dwarfed anything Vatican II brought in its wake. Because of the Council, the sometimes great tensions introduced into the Catholic world by liturgical reform were, over time, made livable within the Church. One need not be delighted with every liturgical change that followed the Council to be grateful that this pent-up longing found a home in the Church rather than outside it. The same goes for other movements and yearnings in pre-Conciliar Catholicism: the active participation of the laity in the mission of the Church, the theological return to the biblical and patristic sources of the faith, and religious freedom as an inalienable feature of human dignity.

More than that, “kneeling before the world” is always a temptation for Christians, one to which Catholics have too often succumbed in the years after the Council. But, without Vatican II, at the right time, bending the knee might have come to seem so normal that Catholics could no longer even tell when they were doing it. Vatican II did not, as some theologians still suppose, accommodate modernity by digging an ugly ditch between the Catholic Church and her past. It channeled the modern flood in a way that was beneficial to the Church just because it was faithful to her traditions. The Coun-

cil was, in that quite fundamental sense, a profoundly conservative event.

A few weeks before my own entry into the Catholic fold, I sat around a lunch table with one of the great leaders of the post-Conciliar Church in America. He had recently returned from the conclave that elected Benedict XVI, and in response to our questions, said as much as the confidentiality of the proceedings would allow, his gratification at the outcome unmistakable. At one point he observed (apropos exactly what I don't recall) that the Church before Vatican II "was like a convent," and the opening to the world effected by the Council was simply necessary. A new way of engaging the modern world was a deep requirement of the Church's own mission to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

A half century after the Council, Catholics in the West still sometimes act as though they were imprisoned in the old convent. Incredibly, some still seem to think the Church's biggest problem is insufficient openness to the modern world. Were they paying attention, they would realize that the Church now needs more, not fewer, convents. Prisoners of the standard narrative, they mistakenly believe Vatican II meant to sever the Church from her past and to set up, as one theologian has risibly put it, a new "constitution" for the Catholic Church. In the process, they forget a hard and basic lesson the Church has learned again and again since 1789. The Council itself teaches this lesson with great clarity in *Gaudium et Spes*: it is the task of the Church "to distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of the divine Word"—and not the other way around. Only thus will we avoid the delusion that peace and salvation are to be found "in a worldview now fashionable."

Catholics who put themselves in the posture of modernity's oppressed advocates—theologians, mostly, but the occasional bishop as well—are often shockingly naïve about the intentions of the world they willingly let into the Church through the windows Vatican II encouraged them to open with proper discernment and care. Failing to see the Council's place in the whole modern history of the Church, they try to unlearn a still harder and more basic lesson about the Church's relationship with the world, one that long antedates Catholicism's journey through modernity. This lesson, too, the Council teaches plainly.

At the heart of its teaching on the identity and mission of the Church, Vatican II deliberately recalls some words of St. Augustine:

“The Church, ‘like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God.’” The world’s assault on the Church is not a thing of the past, but a permanent feature of the Church’s pilgrim life in this “foreign land.” For all the sins and failings of her members, the Church is the one fold of Christ and the temple of the Spirit, and so she values above all not herself, but the “precious treasure” from above of which John XXIII spoke. Just by being herself, by clinging to the consolations of God, the Church makes plain to this world that it and all its treasures are passing away. Jesus taught his disciples: “If the world hates you, know that it hated me before you” (John 15:18). Augustine comments: “It is necessary that the world hates us, because we do not want what it loves.” Modernity has made the world’s hatred of the Church, this primal conflict of loves, more, not less, clear than at any time in the Church’s past.

This is a severe truth. Trying to forget it is not only foolish, but dangerous, above all when we have deliberately opened the windows to let the world in. Vatican II calls for just this opening but offers no excuse at all for trying to forget the hard truth that goes with it. On the contrary, the Council channeled the torrent of modernity in a way that made the Church’s ancient teaching on her relationship with the world especially clear.

The earthly city can never overcome the city whose builder and maker is God, nor triumph over the Church, which will batter down even the gates of hell. The earthly city’s final impotence only enrages it further, especially when it has had, for the moment, an illusory taste of the triumph it will never see. Yet, even till the end of time, the Church will endure the rage of this world and of the tyrants who rule her, sheltered in the wounds of him who holds the keys of death and hell. N·V