

A Montage of Catholic Modernists

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ONE LATE SPRING DAY in 1955 my classmates and I were ushered into the seminary chapel where the rector solemnly greeted us and handed each of us two or three pages of closely typed Latin. He instructed us to read the text aloud in unison, inserting our individual names as appropriate. And so:

I, Marvin Richard O'Connell, firmly embrace and accept each and every definition that has been set forth and declared by the unerring teaching authority of the Church, especially those principal truths which are directly opposed to the errors of this day.

The avowal went on to specify among “those principal truths” particularly the decrees of the First Vatican Council about the relation between faith and reason, and:

Furthermore, I submit and adhere with my whole heart to the condemnations, declarations, and all rescripts contained in the encyclical *Pascendi* and the decree *Lamentabili*, especially those concerning what is known as the history of dogmas.

It was only when I read a translation of what I was then reciting—my Latin was of the purely technical variety—that I realized how passionate was its prose, how far removed from the dry and juridical tone of most documents issuing from the Roman curia.

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Finally, I declare that I am completely opposed to the error of the modernists, who hold that there is nothing divine in the sacred tradition; or, what is worse, say that there is, but in a pantheistic sense, with the result that there would remain but this plain simple fact—one to be put on a par with the ordinary facts of history—the fact, namely, that a group of men by their own labor, skill, and talent have continued through subsequent ages a school begun by Christ and his apostles. I firmly hold, then, and shall hold to my dying breath, the belief of the Fathers in the charism of truth, which certainly is, was, and always will be in the succession of the episcopacy from the apostles. The purpose of this is, then, not that dogma may be tailored according to what seems better and more suited to the culture of each age; rather that the absolute and immutable truth preached by the apostles from the beginning may never be believed to be different, may never be understood in any other way.

I, Marvin Richard O'Connell, shall keep all these articles faithfully, entirely, and sincerely, and guard them inviolate, in no way deviating from them in teaching or in any way in word or in writing. Thus I promise, this I swear, so help me God.

So it was that my classmates and I, on a bright Minnesota May day more than half a century ago, swore the celebrated Oath against Modernism. That the rhetoric of the document at hand smacked of peculiar ardor comes, after some reflection, as no surprise. Giuseppe Sarto—Pope Pius X, who inspired it if he did not write it word for word—was a passionate man, and very much a populist, who found in the opinions of those arrogant academic elitists he called “Modernists,” the “synthesis of all heresies,” which could eventually undermine the Catholic faith of millions, the sophisticated and unsophisticated alike. The papal passion was if anything more pronounced and explicit in the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* of 1907 in which this “synthesis” was described and denounced. Those who had formulated it were “men of boundless effrontery”; as their doctrine is “pernicious,” “destructive,” and “malevolent,” so are they themselves “full of gall and hatred,” “impudent,” “domineering,” “arrogant,” and “imprudent.” “They seize upon chairs in the seminaries and universities and gradually make them chairs of pestilence; one of them but opens his mouth, and the rest applaud him in chorus, proclaiming that science has taken another step forward.” I must admit that this sarcasm and invective were pretty much lost on me in 1955, if indeed I was aware of them. The oath imposed upon us young fellows then—and upon those similarly circumstanced universally across the Catholic world—was, as we saw it, just one of the hoops we had to jump through on our way to the priesthood—like learning how properly to say the Latin Mass or the formula for sacramental absolution—because in a few days time we were

to be ordained to the subdiaconate, the first of the so-called major orders, and thus introduced irrevocably into the clerical estate, required from then on to pray the breviary every day and to observe the rules of celibacy. By virtue of the decree signed on September 1, 1910, by Pius X, we were bound to swear the oath before we took that fateful step. As I look back on that day all these years later, I cannot say that I was moved one way or another by reciting a text I only half-understood.

“Modernism” flourished between 1890 and 1930—so at least we are told by the people who specialize in categorizing cultural phenomena. As such it remains one of those blanket terms that covers so much ground that its usefulness is limited. But there is no doubt that in its various manifestations Modernism represented a profound shifting of the cultural ground. As the twentieth century dawned, that collection of traditional moral and intellectual assumptions, called, not altogether inaccurately, “Victorian” came under challenge, all in the name of modernity. There was “modernist” literature, music, architecture, painting, even modernist economics and psychology. Indeed, the publication in 1900 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* by an until-then obscure Viennese physiologist named Sigmund Freud was very much a sign of the times. Over the next couple of decades, theories about relativity and evolution and astronomy combined to bring into question truths that had seemed timeless and universal. In aesthetics, too, a definition of beauty radically different from that which had held sway for so long thrust itself to the fore. Surely Claude Monet and the other Impressionists, or the young Pablo Picasso, would not subscribe to the same artistic principles as David or Millais. And, a little later, the verse of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot appeared to bear only a scanty relationship to that of Lord Tennyson or Robert Browning. Perhaps among the arts the most instructive in this regard is in the field of serious music. Romantic music, like romantic poetry, is different from the classical. Robert Schumann’s mid-nineteenth-century compositions do not sound like Joseph Haydn or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. But the atonal conclusion of Arnold Schoenberg’s Second String Quartet (1908), the technique of which was adopted by Igor Stravinsky and Alban Berg and many others, represented more than merely a horizontal progression from an agreed starting point. It was, in its way, an intellectual and artistic revolution. Nor was the gloomy science of economics and its political outrider exempt from the winds of change. Anarchists in Spain and socialists in Germany might debate the intricacies of Karl Marx’s teachings, but they agreed that the exploitative financial structures of conventional capitalism had to be eradicated. The war of 1914—the Great War, the war that was to make the world, in Woodrow Wilson’s utopian aspiration, “safe for

democracy"—with its ghastly and seemingly pointless blood-letting—appeared to confirm the bankruptcy of the Western tradition. The victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia made the same point.

Of course swearing the Oath against Modernism did not oblige me to avoid listening to music composed by Schoenberg, though in fact I have gone to considerable pains to do just that. But the Catholic Modernists were also *fin de siècle* thinkers and artists, who displayed the same basic distrust and disdain as their secular brethren for the intellectual milieu in which they found themselves. They too kicked against the goad, they too reveled in the brave new world that nineteenth-century science and technology had created. And, finally, they too were elitists; Catholic Modernism was never a popular movement. It was rather a collection of individuals, more or less in contact with each other—though not always in full agreement with each other—who aimed to bring to bear their new scholarly insights in order to promote reform of the old Church. Indeed, the very term, which the encyclical employed with only a few obscure Italian precedents, came as a surprise to those to whom it applied. Modernism is “a chance name,” observed a friendly contemporary, “a name of circumstance, of accident, unless it was a name given in anger.” “Modernism,” wrote the editors of a French clerical journal, “is a phenomenon so very recent that a word had to be added to the language to cover it.”

The Catholic Modernists were a group of remarkable and, for the most part, attractive persons. Least attractive perhaps was Alfred Loisy, the son of Champagne peasants who became a priest because he was deemed too small and frail—“le petit Loisy” his rough classmates called him in derision, and the nickname followed him into adulthood—to do anything else. But he was smarter than all of them, much smarter, brilliant indeed; and out of his immense linguistic talent, he forged a career as the leading scripturist of his time. A man of iron self-discipline given to unrelenting toil, who published sixty books and three hundred articles of the most intricate scholarship, Loisy came to feel only contempt for those who disagreed with him. Never less alone than when alone, in his memoirs he asserted that he had had only two friends over the course of his life, neither of whom he met on more than a few occasions. As an idealistic young man, Loisy aspired to employ the so-called higher criticism of textual analysis of the Bible in order to create a new Catholic apologetic to serve the needs of a new era. Instead, his methodology led him to conclude that the only article in the Creed he could accept as true was “He suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

George Tyrrell, on the other hand, had a host of friends and limited youthful aspirations. Born in Dublin, he was a Protestant waif in an

incomprehensible Catholic sea. His father, a penniless journalist, died a month before George's birth; and his mother, a warm-hearted if feckless woman, could not provide a permanent home for him and his two siblings. They drifted from one dreary boarding house to another, which, so to speak, set the pattern of George Tyrrell's life: He was perpetually seeking stability, wanting to belong somewhere, belong to something. At school he proved clever but lazy, and, as he put it, his moral life was not so much wicked as slovenly. Still, he reacted strongly against the Calvinist temper predominant in the Church of Ireland, seeking out the rare high Anglican liturgies and ultimately the plentiful Roman ones. At the age of twenty, he fled Dublin for London—he never saw Ireland again—and made his way to the famous Jesuit church on Farm Street, where he was received into the Catholic Church. Shortly after that, he was admitted as a postulant into the Society of Jesus. The love-hate relationship with the Society began almost immediately, and Tyrrell brought to it his warmth and charm and wit, but also his inherent impatience with formality, his inability to acknowledge authority, and, perhaps most significantly, his deep Celtic melancholy, this last exacerbated by guilt at having deserted his mother. Even so, as a Jesuit, his careless and rudderless life assumed at least a measure of direction in accord with his superiors' just estimate of his greatest gift: He wrote a lyrical and compelling English prose, as powerful in its way as Loisy's elegant French. After he read *Pascendi*, Tyrrell said, almost ruefully, "I think the pope had Loisy and me in mind."

No doubt he did, but there were others as well. Baron Friedrich von Hugel, Austro-English polymath, self-taught scholar, linguist, incessant traveler and letter-writer, whose house on the edge of London's Hampstead Heath and later in fashionable Kensington was as close as the Modernists ever came to having a communications center and was at the same time a place of the most intense mystical piety; Albert Houtin, priest of Angers, journalist, democrat, supporter of Dreyfus, self-described "free-lance in the service of the Church"; Romolo Murri, priest, who came out of the stark poverty of the Roman Marches, Italian patriot, social reformer, and political activist; Maurice Blondel, originator of the philosophy of Action, known as much for the holiness of his life as for the acuity of his mind and the denseness of his prose; Maud Petre, Modernist grande dame, scion of a noble English house which had been loyal to Catholicism through all the dangerous and wearisome days of the Penal Laws, a woman of similarly stubborn loyalty who bore ostracism in support of her friends, while through two world wars she cared for widows and orphans in their tribulation; Henri Bremond, secularized Jesuit, recluse, snob, religious psychologist, and literary historian, who crossed the sea at his own peril to be with the dying George

Tyrrell, his friend; Antonio Fogazzaro, novelist, bon vivant, genial politician, and Italian senator whose book *Il Santo* expressed in fictional terms the Modernist ideal and whose last testament, four years after *Pascendi*, said, "There is nothing on this earth I love more than the Church"; Lucien Laberthonnière, Oratorian priest, philosopher, originator of the theory of moral dogmatism, salty controversialist, a familiar figure, bereted and stoop-shouldered, on the Paris metro where he contemplated new ways to smash hip and thigh the hated Aristotelians and Thomists; Lucien Lacroix, secularized Dominican, preparatory-school chaplain, liberal journalist, appointed bishop of Tarentaise at the insistence of the anti-clerical French government and approved by the Vatican only because, in the words of the nuncio to Paris, Tarentaise was "the poorest and least significant diocese in France," self-styled bishop of the Modernists who resigned his see in the wake of *Pascendi* and wandered for the rest of his life in an ecclesiastical limbo; Edouard Le Roy, mathematician, disciple of Bergson, pragmatist, evolutionist, precursor of Teilhard de Chardin, like Von Hugel and Blondel a layman of exceptional personal piety, whose definition of the nature of religious dogma was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in record time; Ernesto Buonaiutti, priest, journalist, historian, philosopher, the only first-rate thinker among the Italian Modernists, whose works were, on three different occasions, placed on the Index, an excommunicate who refused to take off the cassock and who lost his chair at the University of Rome when Mussolini made peace with the Vatican in the Lateran Treaties of 1929; Marcel Hébert, like Loisy a native of Champagne, a gentle, self-effacing priest whose lycée students adored him, who drifted into the conviction that religious activity was void of any value save the symbolic, who asked that only two words be carved upon his tombstone, *In Spe*; Giovanni Seme-ria, Barnabite monk, spellbinding preacher, devotee of Tolstoy, who was allowed, through an exception agreed to by Pius X, to swear with reservations the oath I swore in 1955, who was nevertheless later suspended from priestly functions and found unlikely refuge in the Belgian diocese of the rigidly Thomist Cardinal Mercier, then heroic chaplain during the First World War, and afterward organizer of relief for war orphans in Italy; William Sullivan, Paulist priest turned after *Pascendi* into Unitarian minister, whose novel *The Priest: A Tale of Modernism in New England* remains the unique expression of the phenomenon in the United States; Francis Duffy, dismissed under a Modernist cloud from his professorship in the major seminary in New York, later the famous chaplain of the famous Sixty-Ninth Regiment of New York volunteers—the "fighting Sixty-Ninth"—in memory of which service during World War I his statue broods today over the gaudy and sometimes obscene frolics in Times Square.

What had they written? What had they proposed? What had they done to bring upon themselves such fierce condemnation? Certainly it had nothing to do with their personal morality, to which even *Pascendi* paid grudging tribute. Loisy said Mass every day and confessed every fortnight, while Von Hugel was known to spend hours on end in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Frivolous Lacroix may have been, but surely no one could call him a bad man, and even Fogazzaro in his later years lived in a style that gave little offense. What had they done?

Their contemporary, the often cynical George Santayana, offered a tongue-in-cheek, yet plausible answer. "The Modernist," he said, "starts with the orthodox but untenable persuasion that Catholicism comprehends all that is good; he adds the heterodox though amiable sentiment that any well-meaning ambition of the mind, any hope, any illumination, any science must be good and therefore compatible with Catholicism." But the battle was to be fought out along more specific lines. The Modernist, Santayana continued, "bathes himself in idealistic philosophy, he dabbles in liberal politics, he accepts and emulates rationalist exegesis and anti-clerical church history." And indeed these many intellectual faces of modernity were to show themselves one by one. Thus the Modernists assumed the correctness of Darwinian evolution as applied to societies and institutions as well as to organisms. They assumed as well that the speculations of Descartes and Kant had put to flight forever the old-fashioned confidence that the human intellect could penetrate beyond itself to objectively real phenomena. But they saw this as a liberation, not a hindrance: a liberation from formulas and legalisms that grew out of a lifeless philosophical realism. A realist metaphysic, Laberthonnière liked to say gruffly, was not only foolish but perverse, because it encouraged illusion, just as it thwarted the inward drive toward godliness. Kant had also taught them that the stern voice of conscience within gives assurance of truths that the intellect is powerless to establish.

So the gentle Blondel posited his *philosophie d'action*, understanding "action" in the widest and most profound sense of the word, disdaining the dead end of useless speculation and arguing that, since the human will directs life and produces action and since the will cannot satisfy itself with the finite, the very existence of God can be accepted only because of one's deep and abiding longing for him.

So Laberthonnière—for whom Blondel was a beloved friend and teacher but Descartes was the ultimate *magister*—Laberthonnière developed what he called "moral dogmatism," which sets aside the impotent intellect and seeks the definition of the divine out of *tous les activités de la vie*. Empty dialectics can then give place to something vital and complete, which

provides a sure base for the fundamental truths of religion and the dogmas of Christianity. Laberthonnière liked to contrast Christian reality with what he called Greek theory, the concrete with the abstract; and since for him the individual experience, welling up from inside oneself, was *the* Christian reality, *the* eternal verity, it followed that all creeds and traditions and sacred books needed constant reinterpretation if they were to be relevant to the individual Christian in an ever-changing, ever-evolving life.

So Edouard Le Roy the mathematician, writing in a more or less popular journal, asked, "What is a Dogma?" (1905) and then proposed a new answer. Modern thought, he argued, has a deep aversion to the traditional Catholic faith and especially to the Catholic notion of dogma. The idea of an immutable and authoritative statement of religious truth is unthinkable, either because it presumes an entirely pure authority or it presumes the mind can escape (abstract from) its anthropomorphic conditioning. A secure apologetic for modern men and women can be reached by reversing the conventional order. Instead of seeing dogma as a speculative proposition that has impact upon moral conduct, rather, Le Roy said, regard dogma as the minimum affirmation necessary to justify conduct. Thus, for instance, the dogma of the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament would mean treating the altar bread as though it were Jesus.

This minimalist position sounds at first blush so absurd that I wonder if I am giving due justice to Le Roy's position. Perhaps not; I am surely not philosophically sophisticated. Even so, it seems to me that this reply to the generic question "What is a Dogma?" can make sense only within the penumbra of Blondel's and Laberthonnière's teaching—and Le Roy and Laberthonnière were very close associates, almost for a while in daily communication with each other—within, that is, the Cartesian conviction that recognition of the truth of the Christian evangel about the Eucharist or anything else can be guaranteed only from the proper application of systematic doubt. I wonder how Flannery O'Connor would respond to such intellectual gyrations. "If the Eucharist is merely a symbol of Christ's presence among us," she once famously declared, "then I say the hell with it."

Pascendi in any case called this apologetic Immanentism and charged that it fit all too nicely with the work of the higher critics, like Alfred Loisy; and it was perhaps this natural congruence that caused Pius X to see a conscious conspiracy when in fact there was none. The Higher Criticism came relatively late to trouble Catholic biblical scholarship. Strauss's *Leben Jesu* had appeared in 1836. As early as 1840 Samuel Taylor Coleridge had observed that the Bible should be read like any other book, though he added the qualification that "I do so as far at least as I can or dare."

Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, published in 1863, popularized the theory that the truth of the Scriptures depended solely upon reading them in the light of the literary methods and sources of their authors. The blow was devastating to conventional Protestantism, but the Roman Church took the smug line that the Higher Criticism could not budge its positions, because Catholics had never accepted the view that the Bible authenticates itself or interprets itself. Apologetics demonstrates the divine foundation of the Church, and then the Church guarantees the Bible.

But before long this position began to fall under threat as the critics shifted their attention from the Old to the New Testament. One might accept placidly enough the depiction of the Patriarch Abraham as a desert sheikh. But what if Jesus is reduced, as Renan had reduced him, to an amiable Galilean social reformer with scant moral and no supernatural significance? The apologist uses Scripture as history to establish the right of the Church to interpret Scripture; and so the argument is circular. If the Petrine texts—"Thou art Peter and upon this rock I shall build my Church" (Mt 16:18)—are not historical, or if they have meaning only within the context of Palestine early in the first century, then what?

This was precisely the conclusion reached by Alfred Loisy, who at first took great pains not to bruise orthodox sensibilities, while at the same time he shredded the historicity of the Bible. He protested over and over that creeds and dogmas were quite beyond his scholarly ken, though he seldom passed up an opportunity to express in glittering phrases his reverence for them. His professional business, he said, was with the texts and their meaning, with positivist, scientific facts which the theologians might fit into their doctrines as best suited them. This prudent course—a profound dishonesty as later events amply demonstrated—kept him out of all but one or two scrapes with ecclesiastical authority until 1902 and the publication of *L'Évangile et l'Église*.

The argument of this book, *The Gospel and the Church*, which was intended for the educated general public, was simple enough. The gospel is Jesus' preaching of the messianic kingdom and the call to penance as a kind of eschatological warning of imminent destruction, which was typical of the Judaism of the first century. The Church continues this function, but always in a way subject to the conditions of the time, just as Jesus' preaching was conditioned by the circumstances of his time. So come the successive formulas, creeds, hierarchical institutions, sacraments—all in a kind of rational flux, pressing forward, ever refining themselves, just as the evolving universe does. Nothing stands permanent, nothing that has been said will not be unsaid. For proof of this Loisy, in the most famous sentence in the book—indeed, its thesis sentence—compared Jesus' preaching with what

in fact had been wrought: "Jesus preached the kingdom, and"—*voilà!*—"it is the Church that has come." "Jesus and the Church," he went on, "lift their eyes to the same symbol of hope." "The dogmatic formulas are in the same condition as the words of the Savior. . . . Their value is in the sense that one attaches to them."

At this point *Pascendi* discerned the striking of a bargain between the Modernist philosophers and the Modernist critics. Criticism stripped away the objective foundations of the Christian religion, but Immanen-tism stepped in to fill the gap. The historical personage named Jesus may be permanently elusive; the evangelical miracles may be fairy tales; dogmas like the Incarnation or the Resurrection may simply reflect an elaboration proper to a certain set of temporal circumstances. But never mind. Religious truth is not something that comes out of a proclamation from outside yourself. Religious truth wells up from within you and certifies itself, because it responds to your deepest needs and longings. Religious truth is what you, caught in the flux of time, discover it to be.

There was in fact no such bargain struck. Maurice Blondel, for instance, was horrified by Loisy's critical speculations when he finally came to understand them. But enough similarity of approach and methodology among the Catholic Modernists warranted at least a suspicion on the pope's part of collaboration. And on one matter they did indeed appear to speak in unison. As George Tyrrell famously quipped: "*Pascendi* tries to show the Modernist that he is no Catholic; it mostly succeeds in showing him that he is no scholastic." Hostility among the Modernists to the philosophy and theology of the schools was deep and abiding; and so Pius X's assault upon them, using those intellectual tools, seemed particularly obnoxious. Von Hugel dismissed scholastic metaphysic as "childish." Scholasticism, Blondel said loftily, is "a mountain of ice afloat on the southern sea." The feisty Laberthonnière was driven into paroxysms of rage whenever he had quoted to him the Aristotelian maxim: "There is nothing in the mind which is not first in the senses." They bathed themselves, as Santayana put it, in idealist philosophy.

Nor was this considered an eccentric position to take. One of the sharpest and most eloquent critics of scholasticism was a French priest of impeccable orthodoxy whose reputation as a confessor and spiritual director was legendary in Paris and throughout France. Henri Huvelin was not an academic or a publishing scholar; he was vicar of the parish of Saint-Augustin, on the right bank of the Seine, up the Boulevard Malherbes from the Madeleine. He suffered from gout in the eyes and brain, and spent most of the day lying prone in a darkened room where he served countless troubled and sorrowing souls, with, as Friederich von

Hugel admiringly said, “the supreme authority of self-oblivious love.” Von Hugel first met him during the 1880s and kept in close touch till Huvelin died in 1910. He was, the baron wrote in his fractured prose, “the greatest manifestation of sheer holiness that I have been privileged to watch and to be moved by at close quarters. I owe more to this Frenchman than to any man I have ever known in the flesh.” Henri Bremond and Maud Petre were also regular attendees in the dark upper chamber of the presbytery on the Boulevard Malherbes. Huvelin’s most spectacular feat had been the deathbed conversion of Emile Littré, a ferocious anticlerical politician. But more memorable in the long run was his success in 1886 in bringing back to the practice of his Catholic faith Charles de Foucauld, destined for fame and martyrdom as the Hermit of the Sahara.

One of Huvelin’s great strengths as a director was the care he took to treat each person within the context of that individual’s specific circumstances. In dealing with Von Hugel he gave advice about prayer and self-abnegation and patience with trial—the baron’s progressive deafness was a severe cross for him. But this particular penitent was also an intellectual who spent all his time and energy studying religion, and so Huvelin tailored his guidance to take due account of Von Hugel’s self-defined calling in life. What about these conventional philosophers and theologians, he asked the baron rhetorically, what about these scholastics with their neat syllogistic arguments and brash certitudes? “What are certainties for others,” he said (and Von Hugel recorded),

for you are merely hints, indications, outlines. Scholasticism, even Saint Thomas the greatest of the scholastics, cannot explain everything. The living truth flees definitions from whatever direction. The Scholastics think they can put the moon in a bottle; perhaps they could if the moon were made of cheese. . . . Scholasticism clarifies things by impoverishing them. It cuts great roads in all directions through a virgin forest. It succeeds in seeing the forest more clearly, but how many beautiful trees have been sacrificed. . . . The Scholastics do not understand that life, all life, escapes analysis. What they dissect is the dead body.

“Pass them by,” Abbé Huvelin advised the baron, “with a gentle, very gentle, smile, pass them by.”

But this counsel was difficult for the Catholic Modernists to comply with; pass the scholastics by, yes, to be sure, but gently, gently into the night? That was not so easily agreed to. And there were other factors at work, wheels within wheels, so to speak. The decadent state of traditional scholasticism by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, enfeebled by lethargy and by the intellectual numbness induced by the rote repetition of habit-

ual theses—the dismissal, for example, of serious thinkers like Kant by a couple of bland sentences setting out the *errores adversariorum nostrorum*—was all too clear to see. But then, in 1879, the new pope, Leo XIII—an intellectual, especially if contrasted with his amiable but unlearned predecessor, Pius IX—issued an encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, in which he set out as the Roman Church's official policy that the texts of Thomas Aquinas, the Universal Doctor, should be the basis of all ecclesiastical education. Note, if you please, the texts themselves, not commentary upon them, not manuals allegedly based upon them, not a whole literature of scholastic or even so-called Thomistic studies long since in the public arena, but what in fact the Angelic Doctor had written. This proved a hard saying for many seminary professors, invested as they were in the intellectual status quo; and they evaded the pope's mandate as long as they could. (As late as the 1950s my courses in theology in an American seminary—some, I rejoice to say, not all—were taught out of manuals written by a Sulpician named Adolf Tanquerey [d. 1932], written, it was said in the prefaces, “ad mentem Sancti Thomae.” How the minds of Father Tanquerey and St. Thomas were meant to mesh remains unclear to me to this day.)

This papal intervention was crucial to the story of the Catholic Modernists, even though *Aeterni Patris* was issued a generation before the publication of Blondel's *Action* or Loisy's *L'Évangile et l'Église*. Crucial, because in the authoritative endorsement of Aquinas—and by inference of Aristotle—the encyclical came down, at least for the training of the clergy, on the side of philosophical realism: Or maybe, more to the point here, of realist epistemology. Granted, one always has to confound the temptation to oversimplify, to look for that overarching explanation that can brush aside awkward complexities, for the intellectual silver bullet that does the deed cleanly and swiftly. Even so, does it not seem to you that much of the Catholic Modernist controversy sprang out of varying theories of knowledge? I must tread carefully here—I have trouble enough pronouncing epistemology, to say nothing of trying to plumb its cerebral depths. But I believe it really matters little that the norms of *Aeterni Patris* were applied only slowly and reluctantly, indeed, to a degree were never applied. What did matter was that, whatever Lucien Laberthonnière's fury, the Church he loved and served loyally till he died in 1932 had taken the position that there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses. So that when that other encyclical, *Pascendi*, appeared, it did not need to mention Kant or Laberthonnière's beloved Descartes (nor indeed did it mention anyone by name) in order to bring the theory of Moral Dogmatism into disrepute.

One small irony having to do with *Aeterni Patris*, the Thomistic revival, and Catholic Modernism. The two most prominent Modernists, George

Tyrrell and Alfred Loisy, both eventually excommunicated *nominatim*, both had a youthful and fanciful exposure to the works of St. Thomas. Tyrrell at Stonyhurst, the Jesuit foundation in Lancashire during the mid-1880s, found that his professors continued, despite the encyclical's directives, to filter Aquinas's teaching through "his third-rate commentators and imitators," and so he decided "to throw myself wholly into mastering and defending the Thomistic system of philosophy and theology." An ambition noble perhaps in itself, but hardly feasible for so undisciplined a mind, and adopted really to annoy his superiors. A few years earlier Loisy, a student at the major seminary at Chalons-sur-Marne and bored almost out of his mind by the ordinary curriculum, "plunged boldly," as he put it, and with no direction, into an analysis of the *Summa theologiae*. He went through the tract on the Trinity article by article, an exercise he described later with ill-concealed contempt: "The speculations of St. Thomas on the Trinity had upon me the affect of a huge logomachy and left, as it were, a void." It was merely a bunch of meaningless words to the young Frenchman, and merely a tool to discomfit his Jesuit brethren for the young Irishman. The prideful disposition at work in each case is breathtaking: as though a callow youth without any mature guidance could "master and defend"—Tyrrell's words—one of the most sophisticated philosophical systems ever developed within the Western tradition.

After *Pascendi* the Modernists—as, with reluctance, they were now prepared to call themselves—reacted variously. Loisy put off the soutane and ceased saying Mass with no regret. He lectured at the Collège de France in the chair once held, appropriately, by Ernest Renan. Despite his frailty he lived to a great age; he died of uremia in 1940, just in time to avoid witnessing the third German invasion of his beloved Champagne. George Tyrrell, in contrast, died young in 1909, only forty-eight, wracked all his adult life by migraine headache and nausea, brought down at the end by kidney failure. Maud Petre never left his bedside during the week of his last agony; Baron von Hugel came from London and Henri Bremond from Paris to give his excommunicated friend absolution. Denied Catholic burial, Tyrrell rests now in an Anglican cemetery on the edge of Storrington, in West Sussex. Maud Petre who loved him and who now lies beside him—she died in 1942—commissioned an up-and-coming London sculptor named Eric Gill to fashion the tombstone in accord with the deceased's wishes. Framed by a carved host and chalice, the inscription reads: "Of your charity pray for the soul of George Tyrrell, Catholic priest, who died July 15, 1909, aged forty-eight years. Fortified by the rites of the Church. RIP."

They are all gone now, long gone, the Catholic Modernists. If some uneasy observers today think they discern new Tyrrells or Loisys, they are

surely mistaken. Despite the oft-quoted saying, history does not repeat itself. Every human life is a unique experience. On the other hand, one can certainly see similarities between the ecclesiastical rumbles of 1906 and those of 2006 for a relatively simple reason. From the time of the apostles until now, disputes within the Church have always turned on two questions: first, What shall be taught?; and second, Who shall decide what shall be taught? It has ever been so. But other things have disappeared as well. The Oath against Modernism I swore fifty-one years ago was rescinded by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1967. And the order of subdeacon was suppressed in the Latin rite by Pope Paul VI in 1972. They are all gone now. N·V