

# THE WORLD AND CHURCH...



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## **PART I: THE WORLD WE LIVE IN NOW**

We cannot get a sense of this contemporary moment in history unless we understand why religion and belonging are changing so radically. There are benefits and liabilities. If we put all this in place, we can conjecture where the future will lead us.

So, the first part of this lecture concerns the world we live in now. The second part addresses the Church we live in now.

## **SELF AND TRANSCENDENCE**

There is a longing in the world to reach two objectives over a lifetime. One is self-development with integrity bringing us ownership of our life and the freedom to express this.

Such self-fulfillment, however, is insufficient and shallow unless it is linked with some form of transcendence, perhaps, in love or relationship but also in serving a larger cause that requires sacrifice and courage. We find this need affirmed even in our films, fiction, and popular culture. Patriotism or creative dedication to art or invention, serving the poor or disabled, encounters with larger meaning identify the hero and receive universal acclaim even from those who are self-centered.

Being controlled or rendered servile, heartless authority structures, narrow-minded institutions are the adversary and are rejected.

Religion and Catholicism are identified as dangerous in this way on a scale hitherto unmatched.

The most frequent coping mechanism is belief without belonging. Even Catholics attending Church resort to this.

As we shall see, it is not religion or Catholicism as such which is odious but only those aspects which inhibit self-development and credible transcendence.

## **BELIEF AND BELONGING**

Belief and belonging were present in the past but political, societal, even parental pressures kept people in the system and left personal objections unarticulated. Now, the exodus is relatively easy and few blame others for leaving.

We find the same attitude in marriage and divorce. Divorce escalated in the modern era, not because people are intrinsically unfaithful but because divorce is possible. People are not expected to remain in loveless and hurtful marriages. When there are religions or Catholic objections, the divorcing partner abandons both the unworthy spouse and the Catholic system as well.

It is not easy to get a clear understanding of modernity because it is inter-laced with a passion for self-development and transcendence, personal choices and meaningful fidelity, a desire to serve the self and yet reach the higher summons, impatience with the pointless sacrifice of one's life and yearning to give oneself to a larger love.

# WE LIVE IN NOW

Church officials quickly see an evil in what may be an incredibly important development.

When people do believe without belonging, what is it that they do believe?

Let us summarize five features of this contemporary belief that are fairly universal:

- 1) There is a wide acceptance that Jesus Christ is worth emulating but a lack of confidence of where that leads or even why he is attractive
- 2) There is a belief in God as a life force, with little clarity about who God is or even how to describe that life force
- 3) Certain rituals matter a great deal, especially to Catholics, whether they belong or not to regular Church life: baptisms, weddings, funerals, all life-defining events.
- 4) There is a willingness at charged moments to connect with the past and to follow the guidance of the Catholic Church because it brings a measure of comfort when tragedy overwhelms us (e.g. the assassination of a beloved president, 9/11, the death of Princess Di)
- 5) There is an on-going wish that the Church should endure and a hesitation to deny everything about it. This leads many to resist others when they denigrate the Church excessively. This concern sometimes rises to the level of affection, as in the life of John XXIII or the achievements of Vatican II or the funeral of John Paul II or the election of Francis or, indeed, the ministry of women religious to the poor. Many may not belong and yet want the Church to be there even as they keep it at a distance. The Church can readily become toxic and yet it sometimes brings comfort and may at any moment fill a future need or quiet panic when chaos shatters our sense of stability.

## AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD CATHOLICISM

Let me conclude this first part with reflections on American attitudes toward Catholicism.

For Americans, religion is not primarily about power but about choice. Europeans, correlatively, align Catholicism with power because of their cultural memory of the times when the Church controlled all of public life.

Europeans regularly underestimate how often they go to Church or find it acceptable. Going to church often embarrasses them. Americans exaggerate how regularly they go to Church because they see religion as a value and have a cultural memory of free choice with it. They link religion with the founding of the United States and its subsequent success. It does not, for the most part, embarrass an American to declare it is one nation under God or that religion strengthens family values or to be in a Church they know they can accept selectively on their own terms.

Dissenting Europeans do not want the Church to change from the way they are accustomed to see it so that they can hate it as it is and feel vindicated in that hatred. Dissenting Americans are saddened by the Church's failings and happy when it is reformed.

In any case, the longing for transcendence is deep in the United States. Thus, the importance of being spiritual even if not religious.

In any case, the modern age is secular on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, not because it has lost its moral fiber or is shallow or has no need of God but because it is working out, often unconsciously, the transition to a whole new moment in history.

# THE WORLD AND CHURCH...

We are secular, so to speak, because we no longer need God or Church for our social identity and we no longer need religion or its rituals to find healing. Nor do we need them to ward off evil, natural disasters, Satan, bad fortune or failure.

If this perception of the contemporary world is correct, God, Church and religion may emerge in the future as remarkably meaningful and attractive. Social identity and healing are, for the most part, secular concerns as are natural disasters and personal failing. To utilize religion for these concerns is a less profound way to address the religious enterprise.

## **PART II: THE CHURCH WE LIVE IN NOW**

It is noteworthy that Councils and not Popes have had a decisive influence over the Church in the modern era.

During roughly seven centuries, three of these Councils shaped that period and sent it in new directions. They re-defined what it meant to be a Catholic, reaching back in each instance and finding, remarkably, continuity with the rich and varied past.

The first of these was Constance (1414-1418) which put into operation the principle that when the pastoral life of the Church is imperiled and the popes do not address this but, indeed, make matters worse, a Council may be summoned even against a pope's wishes and act on behalf of the People of God. The Church is the People of God with priority over any structure that impedes this.

Constance pressured all three Popes simultaneously claiming legitimacy to resign or to be removed forcefully. It, then, elected a new Pope on its own authority. No subsequent Council, all of them summoned by Popes, reversed this.

The second of these was Trent (1545-1563), a Council in which Martin Luther's reform set the agenda.

Trent concluded that Luther had gone too far in eliminating the papacy, five of the seven sacraments, and the role played by a teaching Church. Nonetheless, they knew Luther was right on many issues. It condemned what they believed were his erroneous ideas but not all that he called for and never condemned him by name.

Trent dealt with two pivotal items in Luther's critique: reformulation of the doctrines which harmed the pastoral life of the Church; and, elimination of those behaviors which harmed the People of God and created abuse and scandal. On the doctrinal front, it dealt with Luther's idea of the centrality of Scripture; on the behavioral front, allowing bishops to govern dioceses without living there and having no contact with its people except for the money collected.



Trent decreed that Latin was a legitimate way to celebrate the Liturgy but it was not obligatory. It adopted a more optimistic approach to God and grace declaring that God's Presence purifies us to the core of our being and does not leave us sinners who require mercy from God and even then are not thoroughly purified.

Luther's Reformation made the Catholic Church remarkably better and it forced the papacy to become authentically pastoral.

# WE LIVE IN NOW

Trent did not reconsider the ministry of the Pope in the Church even though the papacy was the object of Luther's sharpest criticism. I link Vatican I (1869-1870) with Trent because it did this. It declared that the Pope was not infallible, however, even in faith and morals. Vatican I made clear that only the People of God is infallible, the whole Church. The Pope participates in the infallibility of the Church when his teaching is infallible. It he does not, he is engaged, as John Henry Newman described it, in a suicidal action by which he undermines his own papacy and is not to be followed. Vatican I, read carefully, is not far from Luther's idea that the Church is the People of God, at least with regard to faith.

## VATICAN II

The third of these great Councils is Vatican II. Luther's Reformation had a powerful influence on Vatican II and figured into almost every document, especially the Liturgy, the centrality of Scripture and the legitimacy of the laity in their own right apart from hierarchical endorsement.

As we look back to these Councils of the modern era, it is clear that the Enlightenment and the Reformation have played a decisive role in shaping modern consciousness and that they are irreversible. There was retrenchment during that time, in the Church, some of it severe and illegitimate but retrenchment itself is necessary in moving forward and, to a degree, beneficial. It is abundantly clear that all efforts to bring the Church back to a pre-Enlightenment and pre-Reformation era are futile. I attribute this to the durability and irreversibility of the Spirit in the Church community.

I would like now to focus on Vatican II (1962-1965) and do this in two sections: the roughly fifty years before the Council and the roughly fifty years after its close.

## FIFTY YEARS BEFORE VATICAN II

The approximately fifty years previous to Vatican II started ominously. Pius X (1903-1914) made a last, massive effort to restore a feudal papacy and a monarchical Church.

In 1906 (*Vehementer Nos*), he declared that "the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, like a docile flock" by their pastors. He forbade priests ever to meet together except with the approval of the bishop, rarely given.

Coming into the papacy so soon after Vatican I, he had an exaggerated sense of its role, a role that the very next papacy and Vatican II would reject. In the first fifty years of the twentieth century, Popes acted as if they were the Church itself. This created a need for Vatican II that would reverse this trend.

Pius X condemned the separation of Church and State; Vatican II allowed the separation. Pius XI condemned the ecumenical movement in 1928 (*Mortalium Animos*); Vatican II declared ecumenism the work of the Holy Spirit. Pius X condemned all criticism of the papacy and all love for new learning; Vatican II observed that all genuine human development is from the Spirit and that new biblical scholarship corrects the way we once read Scripture.

Pius X orchestrated the most repressive measures of the modern era, in effect, destroying the intellectual life of the Church for a generation. He set up "Vigilance Councils" in all regions of the Church and linked them in an international effort to root out modern thought and to forbid all publication of its ideas. The next pope, Benedict XV, distanced himself from Pius X and disbanded "Vigilance Councils" throughout the world.

More than this resistance was needed, however, and only a Council as massive and as open as Vatican II could halt the excesses of ideologues terrified of change, people who preferred a Church of a like-minded minority. Such people seemed to be everywhere in this era. They made diversity a form of criminal behavior.

# THE WORLD AND CHURCH...

If anyone, under this reign of terror, had taught what Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis did, that person would have been banished from teaching, writing, and from the Church.

Before we leave the era ushered in by Pius X, I do need to say, in fairness, that he did introduce some helpful changes in the Liturgy, namely, the restoration of the beauty of Gregorian Chant and allowing children as young as seven to receive communion.

It is clear from this brief historical sketch that monarchy and resistance to change are themselves resisted so that they have no abiding future in the Catholic Church.

## OTHER VOICES, THEOLOGICAL AND PAPAL

John Henry Newman reflected on three principles that enter into the definition of being a Catholic.

The first of these is that Church teaching must evolve and develop or else it becomes heresy. He wrote this ten years before Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. Newman observed that a sign of decadence is teaching the same doctrine in the same words from one century to the next.

The second principle is developed by Newman in his essays on consulting the laity in matters of doctrine. The infallibility discussed in Vatican I does not function, he argued, if it is isolated from three structures of the Church on which it depends.

The prophetic structure of the Church is the work of the theological community. Its object is truth and the means to it is reason. Its liability is that it can move from reason to rationalism and become rigid in its formulations.

The priestly or devotional life of the Church is centered in the laity. Its object is a personal, emotional and pastoral relationship with God. Its liability is emotionalism and superstition.

The organizational life of the Church is represented by papacy and episcopacy. Its object is order and efficiency and facilitating communication. Its liability is abuse of power and an assault on the dignity of people and on diversity.

There is no infallibility in the Church unless all three structures make their contributions. Infallibility without the laity is impossible.

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We address now the last of the principles that enter into the definition of being Catholic. We considered development or evolution and, then, consultation with the laity and all structures in the Church. We conclude this analysis with the supremacy of conscience. Conscience is not to be equated with whim or neglect of learning. In its proper sphere it has more dignity than the papacy and must be followed even in those instances when the Pope objects. A Catholic, Newman noted, celebrates and accepts conscience first and the Pope secondarily.

The last papacy before Vatican II, that of Pius XII (1939-1958) prepared the way for the new Council. He did this in three powerful, ground-breaking encyclicals in the 1940's.

*Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) said the Bible must not be interpreted literally or without reference to biblical scholarship. This rejected Pius X in a way that would have had Pius XII banished as a heretic.

# WE LIVE IN NOW

Mystic Corporis (1943) envisioned the Church as a mystical community led by the Spirit, rather than an organization.

Mediator Dei (1947) observed that Liturgy “grows, adapts and accommodates itself to needs and circumstances.” He followed this with a renovation of the entire Holy Week Liturgy, the end of the Eucharistic fast from midnight, and the authorization to allow the vernacular in certain rituals.

## VATICAN II OPENS

And, now, the great moment, the election of John XXIII and the call for Vatican II.

I shall always value the memory of standing in St. Peter’s Square the evening of Angelo Ronalli’s election. Three months after the election, an astonishingly short period of time, John XXIII summoned Vatican II. He was elected in his late 70’s as a transition pope, who was expected to do little.

On October 11, 1962, he, a Church history professor for years, gave one of the greatest speeches in the long centuries of the Church. He opened Vatican II. We did not know this then but he had been told a month before he had terminal cancer and less than a year to live. Someone other than he would have to summon the next session in October of 1963.

“Gaudet mater ecclesiae,” he declared, in a strong and emotional voice: “The Church, our Mother, rejoices...” Mercy matters more than doctrine he observed. Errors die of their own falseness even if no one is condemned or censured. A mother lives in hope and love. As do we. As do we. It is dawn in the life of the Church, a new Church. Let us open the doors of this great basilica and let all the light enter.

Vatican II was the most complex of all the councils in Church history. It was a revolution but, remarkably, it connected with the past, finding in earlier centuries the creative options that needed to be instituted. This freshness, both ancient and new, echoed in all the documents which were written, as never before

in Church history, in a style suitable for spiritual reading and, indeed, was lyrical.

The magnitude of Vatican II was caught best in eight of its sixteen documents, most notably, those on the Church, Liturgy, Revelation and the Modern World as well as Ecumenism, Religious Liberty, Non-Christian Religions, and the Laity.



No other council broke ground in so many areas and on such a scale. Nor did any other council embrace the world as it is and reach out to all humanity by addressing all people of good will.

The document on the Church called for a collegial Church. Liturgy brought in the most massive Liturgical reform in Church history reversing more than a millennium of priest-centered celebrations. A collegial Church and a community-centered Liturgy reenforce each other.

# THE WORLD AND CHURCH...

The document on Revelation gave us a Gospel-centered theology and a Scripture-based Church. Ecumenism called for the end of all hostility between the Christian Churches by using the common language from the New Testament we share. It celebrated what each Christian Church gives the other in the way it developed its own theological expression and spiritual life. Ecumenical harmony was to extend to Non-Christian religions and the insights they offer Christianity in their sense of God and their expression of devotion to God.

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Revelation, Ecumenism, and Non-Christian Religions reenforce each other in creating one human family which has God's Spirit in it and is filled with people of good will. Indeed, the Council was showing that it was dawn for all of us.

Religious Liberty and its teaching on conscience opened the way for accepting non-believers and their heart-felt and thoughtful choices for a better life.

The documents on the Laity and the Church in the Modern World have the capacity to challenge the Church itself in radically new ways in the immediate and distant future.

## **FIFTY YEARS AFTER VATICAN II**

After the Council, three conservative popes were chosen in immediate succession. It is instructive to note how these men not only slowed the process of reform but, in some instances, tried to reverse it and were unable. The Council compelled them to move in directions their previous training and present agendas did not envision or always prefer.

Paul VI, in a sense, made the most harmful decisions in the fifty-year period by prohibiting birth control in all instances, insisting on obligatory celibacy for priests and seriously weakening the key collegial structure Vatican II called for, the Synod of Bishops. Had these three decisions been left to the Council, it would have changed the birth control prohibition and created a married priesthood in mission countries and organized a truly representative and collegial Synod of Bishops. The consequent, catastrophic pastoral damage and alienation in the Church these unilateral and inept decisions caused is proof positive that collegial action is remarkably better than monarchical approaches.

Nonetheless, Paul did complete the Council he inherited, much to his credit. And he moved in astonishingly new directions when he need not have done so. He delivered at the United Nations one of the best speeches, perhaps the best, ever delivered by a pope outside Rome, "No more war." Paul began the pastoral initiative of global papal journeys. In India, he celebrated Hindu faith and Gandhi; in Jerusalem he greeted Athenagoras, the Orthodox Christian leader, with generosity and warmth; in Geneva, at the World Council of Churches, he admitted publicly that the papacy is an issue that makes Christian reunion difficult. Paul allowed priests to resign their canonical status and enter into sacramental Catholic marriages. Most of these initiatives were schismatic or heretical a mere sixty years of so earlier under Pius X.

John Paul II created a devastating amount of pastoral damage in an effort to reverse or halt Vatican II by appointing bishops for ideological conformity, brooking no opposition, so that collegiality seemed to fade into monarchy. It will take a long time to repair and recover but the Church at large will.

Nonetheless, John Paul II went to a Lutheran Church in Rome to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's birthday. He went to synagogues around the world and was considered by the world-wide Jewish community someone they trusted and a strong supporter of Vatican II's favorable estimation of world religions and of its strong statements condemning anti-Semitism.

# WE LIVE IN NOW

He gathered religious leaders from many nations and all faiths and prayed with them in Assisi as an equal. He was the first pope to pray in mosques while on his travels.

John Paul II asked the human family to forgive Catholics for the harm caused by them. He did this in a solemn ceremony on the eve of the third millennium, listing the sins of Catholics to be regretted.

In a dramatic ecumenical step forward, he approved the Augsburg Confession after Catholic and Lutheran theologians made a report on it that was mutually acceptable. The Confession was a charter for Lutheran theology and faith formulated during Luther's lifetime. And John Paul II accepted as married Catholic priests formerly married Anglican priests on a case-by-case basis.

John Paul II would not act in this way had Vatican II not changed the Catholic Church so radically. Thus, even those, like himself, so reticent about Vatican II were changed substantially by it in ways they may not have realized.



Benedict XVI met with Hans Kung, the chief Catholic theologian opposed to papal infallibility, without demanding a retraction from him. He apologized for his missteps publicly and often and he, too, a pillar of orthodoxy visited Orthodox and Protestant Churches, synagogues and mosques. He also re-introduced the idea of papal resignation from office.

Pope Francis has given the world a sign of what a renewed papacy looks like. His humility has captured the heart of the human family and has created an enormous pressure against a monarchical papacy. Francis is another John XXIII. He has quietly reversed the harshness of John Paul II and the limited vision of Benedict XVI. Side-by-side with John's opening speech at Vatican II and Paul VI's United Nations address, one of the most telling lines uttered by a pope in our era or in Church history is his question: "Who am I to judge?" when he was asked about same-sex issues. His booklet *The Joy of the Gospel* stands with two other documents, released by popes during or after Vatican II: John's *Pacem in Terris* and Paul's ringing social justice letter *Populorum Progressio*.

Vatican II has held after we have had almost half a century of very conservative popes.

The world now teaches the Church, on occasion, lessons in moral behavior and the Church complies or recognizes the legitimacy of the concern. For example:

- a) financial transparency, honesty and accountability
- b) juridical responsibility in sexual abuse by clergy
- c) equity for women in Church life and structures
- d) development of an anti-monarchical culture
- e) the elimination of capital punishment
- f) sexual ethics reform issues

Within the Church, a vast majority of Catholics accepts, in certain circumstances, divorce, and same-sex marriage, birth control, a married priesthood, the ordination of women. Catholics are attentive to their own experience and the arguments on behalf of those pastoral issues. All the hierarchical pressure to convince Catholics otherwise has been ineffective.



# THE WORLD AND CHURCH...

The world teaching the Church and laity, unresponsive to strong hierarchical resistance, are results of the influence of documents on The Church in the Modern World and the Laity. The laity are nuanced on these matters and do not endorse across-the-board solutions. Remarkably, Catholics who reject so much of Church teaching consider themselves faithful Catholics. They have seen the Church as also theirs and their consciences as sacred ground.

## CONCLUSION

Hope has historical roots. It is not only a gift of the Spirit but becomes sacramentalized in history. Theology makes clear, as does the Gospel, that a loss of hope is never justified. And history bears witness to this truth.

Hope, as history or as God's Presence in our world, does not yield to our needs to have it manifest itself in a certain form or at a time of our choosing.

In the short term, we have reasons for despair. But the arc of history bends not only toward justice but also toward hope. In the long term, hope prevails.

The human family has resiliency and life, endurance and strength. At the end of each century we find ourselves far beyond where we thought we would be. It is, of course, just so in the Church.

The Catholic Church is too diverse and expansive, too rich in its memory and heritage, for one pope or one Church structure or one theology or one council to make it uniform.

When we see our hopes justified, we are elated. We cannot see that happen to all of them. But we can always labor for the hopes we long for and know we have served their emergence even if they come after us. And, to be direct about this, not all our hopes are worthy of full realization. We have at times come to realize that some things we once wanted ardently are no longer desirable, and we prefer that they be set aside.

In any case, our lives pass into memory even when they fail. For God has the final word and this word never ceases to justify our deepest hopes.

