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CATHOLICS ARE “JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE”?

The Council and Catholic Conviction

By Stephen M. Fields, S.J.

A century and a half ago, Cardinal Newman remarked in his autobiography *Apologia pro Vita Sua* that, in religion, the human mind has only two logically consistent options: Catholicism or atheism. Those of us nurtured before Vatican II will recall that we and our fellow Catholics had little doubt about Newman's conviction. As Sebastian Flyte in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* observes to his agnostic chum Charles Ryder: "Everything [Catholics] think is important is different from other people." Replies the benighted Charles, "They seem just like everyone else." Retorts Sebastian brusquely, "That's exactly what they're not." Now half a century in the Council's wake, skepticism about Newman's conviction flourishes. Accordingly, it is natural to ask whether the great *aggiornamento* has contributed to it.

Let us first consider Newman's argument. The salvation of the human family, it claims, must necessarily be communal and historical. An impartial survey of the world's past, "in its length and breadth," serves to confound us by its sheer absence of God. "The defeat of good, the success of evil," physical and "mental anguish," "the prevailing idolatries," and the "corruptions" evinced so consistently by diverse cults and cultures lead us to confront a "profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution." Even as our birth cry is elicited, we come forth already as heir and hostage of an "aboriginal calamity." Our race is disjoined from the purposes of its Creator, assuming, of course, that One exists who is both benign and omnipotent. Shaped and formed by this calamity, we feel powerless to avoid its corrosive influence on our thoughts, values, inclinations, choices, and actions.

Only one coherent solution emerges. The past in its entirety must somehow be righted, fundamental justice restored, and hope of transcendence instilled. Nothing less than an incarnation of infinite goodness in time and space will suffice. Even if, however, we accept in faith that Christ has accomplished these goals, still we are brought head to head with a more formidable obstacle: the claim of an infallible church to be the necessary means of making Christ's saving work available. This belief makes sense only if we accept that God has endowed this institution with sufficient power to triumph over our indigenous burden of sin. To do this, it must possess a divine guarantee of truth, for error cannot defeat itself.

However cogent Newman's argument may be, our modern minds, suspicious of authority, do not readily find it congenial. Moreover, recent experience of the church's conspicuous sin offers us scant encouragement to trust, however much we realize that the fallibility of the Gospel's ministers does not compromise the working of grace in the sacraments they mediate. Hard enough to resist, these pressures are compounded by interpretations of the council sharing a 'hermeneutic of discontinuity.' Emphasizing Vatican II's uniqueness against the whole of Catholic tradition, this sometimes contends that the Church offers but one option to salvation among the various religions of humanity. Has support, therefore, for Newman's conviction evanesced, and are we, as a result, "just like everyone else"?

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Charles Ryder is wrong.

For better or worse, our answer must take its cue from the disputations of the Medieval scholastics: *sic et non* (yes and no). On the one hand, Avery Dulles, writing on the council's fortieth anniversary, carefully surveys its documents on the Church, divine revelation, ecumenism, religious liberty, and missionary activity. Without doubt, he concludes, they affirm that salvation is found in no other name but Jesus; that baptism, as the door to the Church, is required for salvation; that the one true religion cannot subsist anywhere but in the Roman Catholic Church; and that Scripture has no independence apart from the Church which interprets it. It seems, at least according to magisterial theory, that the basic premises grounding Newman's conviction stand as sure as when they led him into the fold. In short, Charles Ryder is wrong.

On the other hand, as I read Vatican II, it interprets these claims analogously. It retrieves and develops a principle intrinsic to the Incarnation as officially promulgated at Chalcedon in 451. Because humanity and divinity unite in the one person of Christ, a blending of infinite and finite obtains in God's plan for salvation, even though each of these remains integral and distinct. It follows, therefore, that human nature, together with its history, never exists bereft of a certain divine presence. As St. Irenaeus taught in the second century that all creation has been 'recapitulated' in Christ – taken up into him, and so renewed and reformed. Consequently, the Council seeks to draw the entire human family into the one true church, but at varying levels and in different degrees, from those who share with Catholics a common baptism, to the Jews who share the covenant, and to others who, sincerely following their consciences, can be baptized 'by desire.'

Similarly, "The Church in the Modern World" makes a broad use of analogy to teach the goodness of human culture. This it defines as those institutions, like government and the university, and those symbols, like the arts and sciences, that more deeply understand and refine the physical world. Culture expresses the "spiritual experiences and aspirations" of our species. It springs from our rational nature that is freely capable of transcending the chaos of brute sensuality. "Only" through culture can "real and full humanity" be achieved, the Council teaches.

Charles Ryder is...

Nonetheless, although it embodies the accumulated legacy of our creativity, culture's intrinsic truth and beauty need grace in order continually to be renewed. Most importantly, contends Vatican II, grace brings this

Two ways of interpreting Vatican II

"Hermeneutics" refers to methods of interpretation. The "hermeneutic of discontinuity" interprets Vatican II as a distinct change from the past, even a radical turn from previous teaching. Examples would be the church's apology to the Jewish people and a profound appreciation of the enduring covenant found in Judaism. Likewise, the council's affirmation of democracy was radically different from the teaching of popes such as Pius IX who had condemned it in the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864).

"Hermeneutic of continuity" holds that Vatican II was a renewal and reaffirmation of all that had gone before, only cast in new language so that it was understandable to the modern era.

Theologian Joseph Ratzinger espoused a hermeneutic of continuity, which he continues to advance in his role as Benedict XVI. The Jesuit historian John O'Malley, S.J., demonstrates that both hermeneutics were present in the council and that the pastoral style and spirit of the council are vital for interpreting the text. See *What Happened at Vatican II* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

renewal about, not by standing outside of culture in stern judgment, but "from the inside." The document cites the book of Proverbs to explain what it means. Wherever authentic value inheres in human institutions and symbols, there likewise inheres "the wonderful wisdom which was with God from the beginning." This wisdom, of course, is the divine Logos, through whom "all things were made" (Jn 1.3). Because Christ incarnates the Logos, it follows that Christ is implicit wherever goodness is found. It further follows, as a result, that Catholics share a deep bond with 'everyone else.' In short, Charles Ryder is right.

On balance, therefore, the great *aggiornamento* reaffirms Newman's claim, even as it frames a more nuanced understanding of Catholics' relation to "everyone else" than Sebastian. Conscious of the ubiquity of grace that "wills all people to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim 2.4), the council places the church in a religiously analogous world. This project, in my view, represents less of a paradigm shift than a recovery of doctrines rooted deep in Christianity. Guiding the early church, these fueled countless martyrs to die for Catholic truth. There is no reason why they should not sustain our own abiding witness to this same conviction. ■