

The Great Disaffiliation Part II

David Timbs*

Vatican II: A new spirit in the Church.

The Second Vatican Council provided Catholics with an enormous injection of confidence in a world already brimming with high aspirations following half a century of global war and ruin. Despite understandable climate of cynicism and suspicion of old ideologies, Catholics found themselves buoyed by the prospects of living their Faith and expressing it in ways which would invigorate and sustain them. They also found new courage to become more effective bearers of the Gospel to their neighbours.

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. # 1. The Preface. (1)

Vatican II triggered a revolution in the way the Catholics imagined themselves, their various callings, ministries and way their Church was governed. For example, the Laity were urged to collaborate with their priests, to exercise co-responsible and accountable participation in Church life. This often took the form of membership on parish councils as well as taking important positions in diocesan and national institutions. Significantly, for the first time in Catholic history, professional theological education became common place and through to the highest academic levels.

For the majority of Vat II Catholics, the most readily understood, tangible and appreciated change to their faith lives was the introduction of the Eucharistic liturgy in the vernacular. The Council had made it possible for Catholics to worship *with full, conscious and active participation*. US liturgical commentator, Rita Ferrone, reflecting on Pope Francis remembrance of the first Mass in Italian celebrated in Rome by Paul VI, has highlighted its symbolic importance. From the balcony of St. Peter's on that First Sunday of Lent, Francis said:

“The church has made this sacrifice of an age-old tradition [Latin] and above all in unity of language among diverse peoples to bow to a higher universality, an outreach to all peoples.”
(2)

Despite the fresh hopes, new found energies and unprecedented opportunities engendered by Vatican II, an alarming trend towards large-scale disaffiliation from Catholic Faith - practice had already begun. Between 1961 and 1978, 23% of the Catholic population disengaged from regular Church life. A major papal document published in 1968 probably did more to contribute to the attrition rate than anything else for years to come.

The Magisterium: A loss of credibility and trust.

After the initial post Vatican II enthusiasm and euphoria that the Church experienced and as the reform gathered momentum one fateful decision by the Pope stopped the Catholic people dead in their tracks.

This setback occurred in 1968 when Pope Paul issued the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. While it was a very positive affirmation of Marriage, the Letter included a prohibition of artificial birth control. This was despite the compellingly rational and theologically sound advice from a majority group of advisers. Pope Paul was pressured by the conservative few, lost his nerve and lost a huge number of Catholic women and men in the process.

It would have been better if he had said nothing at all because, by that time, the vast majority of Catholics had arrived at a mature, adult, conscientious decision on the moral status of artificial birth-control. The Encyclical simply occasioned the beginning of a massive loss of credibility and popular trust for the *Magisterium* which would accelerate until the present day. Jason Berry comments:

“Instead, the promulgation of the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* saw a huge crumbling of papal prestige, a demystifying of the office in the media age, massive dissent on a global scale, with theologians and even some bishops siding with the freedom of conscience invested in People of God, the new term for lay people, Catholics in the pews, as propounded by Vatican II three years before.” (3)

It was from about 1968 that the Catholic Church experienced not only a significant decline in the participation rates of lay women and men but the beginnings of a mass exodus from the priesthood and religious life. The Church-scape never looked the same after that time.

The *Magisterium* of the Catholic Church has been in a state of denial and cognitive dissonance ever since it became obvious that upwards of 98% of Catholics have not received the teaching on artificial birth control. They have, in fact, emphatically rejected it. This poses a fundamental doctrinal challenge for the *Magisterium* because the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium* is in rupture from its teaching, quite erroneously described by some as *infallible*.

The denial of overwhelming conscientious dissent could be described in some fashion by what Noam Chomsky calls *Manufactured Consent*. In this case, the hierarchy has continued to play the game of pretence that it is right and that the majority of people are marginally dissenting or invincibly ignorant and this will be remedied with an intense campaign of corrective catechesis. This elaborate game is obvious in the final survey questions contained in the Working Document for the Ordinary Synod in October, 2015.

Paul VI had for many years been severely exercised by the climate of restlessness, impatience and heated debate in the Church. Some commentators, rightly or wrongly, had described Pope Paul as being severely depressed and even neurotic. His death in 1978 was regarded by

many people as a happy release for him after so many years serving as a bridge between two vastly different eras in the Church's history.

There was a brief period of respite and calm as Catholics basked in the refreshing and reassuring smile of John Paul I. That lasted thirty days. Then he died.

Thirty five years of introspection, amnesia and stagnation.

The election of John Paul II in 1978 marked the start of a thirty five year period of historical revisionist tinkering with key Vatican II doctrinal initiatives. During this papacy those who thought themselves badly done by with Vatican II reforms engineered a program of *restorationism* in Church life, spiritualities and liturgy. Narrow self-interest subgroups, supported by careerist conservatives in the Roman Curia virtually redefined the Church according to a pre-Vatican II ecclesiological model. They also established protective measure to ensure the survival of their clericalist subculture. It is clear that few, if any, understood the meaning of the word 'accountable.' There is no equivalent in Italian! Even authoritarian autocrats like JP II and Benedict attempted to reform the Curia, they were frustrated by the bureaucrats and their efforts were in vain.

Integral to the process of regression under these Popes was the shameless, systematic erasure of large chunks of the Church memory banks. Much of the *Magisterim* of Vatican II and its bishops became victim of conveniently confected repressed memory syndrome. Furthermore, it is now clear that neither of these Popes fully received or accepted all Council teachings. Both of them were selective in the way they 'interpreted' key Council teachings on the Tradition including episcopal collegiality and areas of local Church autonomy.

Well before they were elected, both men had clearly lost their nerve when confronted with vision and reforms of Vatican II. Given their backgrounds, that was probably inevitable as they would have understood the potential threat to absolute papal power and authority. Even during the Council debates on the drafts of *Gaudium et Spes*, both had grave suspicions of a Church defined by a spirit of optimism which they would have considered wildly naive.

What aroused both fear and suspicion in Wojtyla and Ratzinger can be perhaps best explained by the history of the theology behind *Gaudium et Spes*. Fr Marie-Dominique Chenu OP, supported by fellow Dominicans, Yves Congar and Edward Schillebeeckx, was the theological architect behind the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Cardinal Suenens of Brussels and other influential bishops were the major sponsors. Among the fiercest critics of the Constitution were Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, Henri de Lubac and Jean Danielou. It is very instructive to discover that some of these opponents of *Gaudium et Spes* later went on to revise down its importance and, thereby, provided the blueprint for the ideological revisionism of JP II and Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. (4)

The optimistic French spirit triumphed over the gloom, pessimism and existential angst of the Polish and Germanic psyche. John Wilkins explains:

'Benedict took the whole Church with him into the gloomy teutonic world of pessimism heavily influenced by his Augustinian hermeneutic of suspicion of hopefulness.'

“As has long been known, Ratzinger's major reservation concerns *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, generally regarded as a jewel in the council's crown. Ratzinger never liked this text. (He, Rahner and other German theologians).. never escape the force of their fellow countryman Luther's analysis of the bondage of the will to sin--a bondage they understood all too well through their experience of the demonic evil of the Third Reich. As an Augustinian, Ratzinger looked askance at the Thomist foundations of *Gaudium et Spes*, which celebrated the revelatory mystery of Being. Earlier, he had depicted theology as "oscillating between two extremes; on the one hand, an affirmation of the world; on the other, a radical theology of the Cross." He took the second preference, and in 1967, in another commentary on the work of the council, lamented that *Gaudium et Spes* was set in a framework that "is not at all prepared to make sin the center of the theological edifice." For him, as for Rahner, a pessimism that Christians should profess toward the world was missing.’ (5)

That sin should be a major concern for the Church and its mission in the world is to be expected at any time. Church leaders were, however, deeply convinced that, by the end of WWII and after half a century of violence and bloodshed, humanity had become morally desensitised.

“The sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin. – Pope Pius XII (in a 1946 address to the United States Catechetical Congress)

A spirit of entrenched pessimism combined with deep hostility, confrontation and animosity towards ‘the world’ had wearied and dispirited many Catholics for years. They have been indoctrinated with unctuous homiletics against moral relativism and reminders of unworthiness and sinfulness to the point of disengagement to say the least. It has also engendered within the Catholic people a deep sense of cynicism towards many Church leaders whom they perceive to be moralising interventionist outsiders who fraudulently always assume the authoritarian high ground.

What has been torn from the Catholic soul over recent decades is any remaining respect and credibility the Faithful may have invested in Popes and Bishops. The sheer levels of duplicity, hubris and hypocrisy demonstrated by the hierarchy over decades of institutional secrecy and cover-ups over the clerical child sexual abuse has clearly broken faith and trust almost irreversibly. Cardinal Sean O’Malley of Boston, recently appointed leader of a Pontifical Commission of inquiry into clerical CSA has admitted:

“This (CSA) has been caused in large part by the perception of a lack of accountability on the part of our leadership, causing many people to lose their trust in us and in the church,” he said. “We cannot fail to do all that is possible to restore our credibility.” (6)

The worst years of this catastrophe, 1978 to the present, have seen a further 20% of Catholics disaffiliate from the Church. Many no doubt just slipped away but very large numbers, it is reasonable to assume, walked out in protest, consciously, angrily and decisively.

In the May Newsletter there will be a short article investigating the destination of the 80-90% or so Australian Catholics who have disaffiliated. Then, in the June Letter, the Francis Effect will be examined ahead of the Ordinary Synod of Bishops in Rome, October 2015.

Endnotes:

- 1) The Constitution on the Church in the modern World (Linked [here](#))
- 2) “More On Pope Francis Commemoration of Paul VI First Mass in Italian,” *Pray Tell*, February 27, 2015 [Here](#).
- 3) Jason Berry, “A Catholic Critic Warms to Francis,” *The Daily Beast*, 08/03/2015 (Linked [here](#)) See also Austen Invereigh, “The Great Reformer. Francis and the making of a radical Pope.” (London: Allen and Unwin, 2014) 91.
- 4) Massimo Faggioli, “The Battle over ‘Gaudium et Spes’ Then and Now. Dialogue with the Modern World after Vatican II” Georgetown University Conference Vatican II. October 11-12, 2012. (Linked [here](#))
- 5) John Wilkins, “Ratzinger at Vatican II. The Pope who can and cannot change.” *Commonweal Magazine*, May 31, 2010.
- 6) “Pope Francis’ sex abuse point man urges bishop accountability,” *Daily News/Associated Press report*, February 16, 2015.

Some further reading on *Humanae Vitae* and related issues:

“We need a new approach, starting with basic Catholic values like the primacy of love and justice, respect for conscience, the dignity of human life and human sexuality understood in all its aspects, and trust that sound arguments will resonate with people of good will. Doctrine should reflect the way those basic values are incarnate in the lives of Catholics, and especially women, whose voices have largely been absent from the formulation of the church’s teaching on this question. The credibility of church leaders, especially on sexual matters, was badly undercut by *Humanae Vitae*. To double down on a doctrine that presents an unnatural vision of sex to Catholics who know better would only exacerbate the atmosphere of distrust between the laity and their bishops. Silence is not the answer. Nor is a “gradualist” approach: the problem with *Humanae Vitae* is not that people are striving, with incomplete success, to grow into this teaching, but that the terms of the teaching itself do not seem to reflect their experience. Nor does the encyclical’s reasoning about what is and isn’t sinful intent when it comes to avoiding pregnancy convince most ordinary Catholics. The bishops—and, more urgently still, those at October’s synod in Rome—need to begin by paying attention to all the people of God, the insights of the sciences, and the full range of theological opinion.”

- Lisa Fullham, “Does Method Matter? Contraception and Catholic Identity: Unnatural Vision?” *Commonweal Magazine*, 9 March, 2015. (Link [Here](#))

“To the dismay of the authorities, the report of the majority of the commission was leaked to the *National Catholic Reporter*. Ottaviani said the commission was trying to force Paul’s hand. If the church could change on this, what authority would it have on moral matters? The

whole natural law would be discredited. (The Jesuit) John C. Ford had told the commission that masturbation would now run wild. Souls had been sent to hell for committing the mortal sin of contraception. Would they now be given passes to leave? Paul agreed with Ottaviani that if he gave way on this, the entire structure of Church teaching would crumble. To the dismay of the authorities, the report of the majority of the commission was leaked to the *National Catholic Reporter*. Ottaviani said the commission was trying to force Paul's hand. If the church could change on this, what authority would it have on moral matters? The whole natural law would be discredited. (The Jesuit) John C. Ford had told the commission that masturbation would now run wild. Souls had been sent to hell for committing the mortal sin of contraception. Would they now be given passes to leave? Paul agreed with Ottaviani that if he gave way on this, the entire structure of Church teaching would crumble.”

- Jason Berry, “A Catholic Critic Warms to Francis,” *The Daily Beast*, 08/03/2015
(Linked [here](#))
-

*David Timbs is a member of Catholics for Renewal. April, 2015.