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The Counter-Reformation of Pope John Paul II?

by Ranald Macaulay

One sometimes has the impression that, in the face of the uncontrollable forces of decentralization and secularization released by Vatican II, John Paul II dreams of carrying out a new Counter-Reformation – or rather, a restoration – to minimize what he considers to be the 'damage' caused by the Council.

Alain Woodrow (1995)[1]

Summary

The Second Vatican Council introduced dramatic changes to the Roman Catholic Church and Christians everywhere welcomed its new spirit of openness. Since then, however, it has become apparent that Pope John Paul II represents a strongly traditionalist Catholicism, as demonstrated by his active support of Opus Dei. He appears to represent two conflicting agendas, one open and progressive, the other traditionalist. His creation of a more conservative hierarchy during the past 22 years increases uncertainty about the degree of change since 1962 and provides the context within which to assess current dialogues between Catholics and evangelicals.

Chronology – important dates

1846	Pius IX elected
1854	Dogma: The Immaculate Conception of Mary
1864	Encyclical: the 'Syllabus of Errors'
1870	VATICAN I & dogma: Papal Infallibility
1939	Pius XII elected
1950	Dogma: The Assumption of Mary
1958	John XXIII elected
1962–65	VATICAN II
1963	Paul VI elected
1978	John Paul II elected

'Evangelicals and Catholics Together'

It is forty years since Vatican II and the present pope, in line with the example of his immediate predecessors, has actively sought to extend the ecumenical commitments of the 1960s. Official consultations have taken place between Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Anglicans, for example, and the recent agreement in Germany over justification by faith, whether substantial or not, indicates the degree to which the process has advanced. Nor is it surprising, particularly in view of the Council's revised attitude to Bible reading by the laity, that consultations have taken place between evangelicals and Catholics, most notably 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' (ECT). These were discussions in the United States which resulted in two agreed statements: the first called 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together: the Christian Mission in the Third Millennium' (1994),[2] and the second 'The Gift of Salvation' (1998).[3] Both lament the fact that Catholics and evangelicals are divided and point on one hand to the need for united action in the face of an increasingly secular and aggressive society, and on the other to areas of theological agreement between the two traditions. In important doctrinal areas, they argue, greater unity exists than was earlier imagined. Hence their call for further steps to heal the divisions of the past. Not that they ignore remaining areas of disagreement between the two groups or are facile about how to resolve them, but clearly they sense a window of opportunity as a result of Vatican II. The fact that these sentiments were accorded a standing ovation at the 1998 CS Lewis centenary celebrations in Cambridge indicates support from a significant segment of the evangelical world.

One of the purposes of this paper is to evaluate these new developments. Because their theological aspects have been widely discussed, the focus of this paper lies elsewhere, on the larger historical background of the pontificate of John Paul II. The Council

1 Alain Woodrow, *The Jesuits: A Story of Power*, Geofrey Chapman, 1995, p 248.
2 ed. Colson & Neuhaus, *Evangelicals & Catholics Together: Toward A Common Mission*, Dallas: Word, 1995.
3 *First Things* 79, January 1998: pp20–23.

of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century repudiated the three great *solas* of the Reformation: *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. The question remains, therefore, has Catholicism really changed and to what extent have evangelical fears been justifiably allayed?

The issue is difficult and sensitive, even poignant: 'difficult' because Catholicism, like Protestantism, represents a variety of theological positions and it is hard to be fair to all, especially in a brief analysis like this; 'sensitive' because criticism of friends can easily be mistaken as a lack of respect and trust and, worse still, as an all too familiar, knee-jerk anti-Catholicism; 'poignant' because, since the 1960s, new relationships have formed across the Catholic–Protestant divide, not only amongst leaders – as in the case of the ECT discussions – but at the level of a grass-roots ecumenicity. Added to which, evangelicals have found much to admire within Catholicism: conservative biblical scholars have benefited from their Catholic counterparts; thoughtful and stimulating journals like *First Things* have impressed evangelicals by their breadth and depth of cultural analysis; the erosion of Christian values has led to combined political action, to what Francis Schaeffer called 'co-belligerency', most notably on the issue of abortion. The moral courage of Catholic leaders such as Mother Teresa and Cardinal Winning of Glasgow, not to mention John Paul II himself, has rarely been matched within the Protestant world. In these and other ways, particularly in view of the American, secular–spiritual 'culture-wars' of the late twentieth century, evangelicals have rightly appreciated many aspects of contemporary Catholicism. As a result and in ways which would have been inconceivable before 1965, evangelicals and Catholics have been drawn closer.

The conversations which gave rise to the first ECT statement in March 1994 were largely the result of a personal friendship, starting in 1985, between Richard John Neuhaus (a Catholic convert from Lutheranism and editor of *First Things*) and Chuck Colson (an evangelical writer and spokesman who founded Prison Fellowship). They were informal in the sense that they were independent of the official conversations between the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant and evangelical denominations. As such they were private documents. But given the prominence of those involved, their impact was considerable, especially within evangelical circles. Neuhaus and Colson later admitted, in fact, that they 'were not prepared for the intensity of the discussion – and the controversy – that greeted the declaration...'[4] They had started out with a shared concern about the growing Catholic–evangelical animosity in Latin America and this provided the central focus of their first discussions in New York City in September 1992. They soon realised that they had a prior question to address:

> *How could we speak a useful word to our brothers and sisters elsewhere if we had not in a more careful and comprehensive way addressed our relationship with one another in North America?...In the course of our conversations it dawned upon a number of participants, almost simultaneously, as though by the prompting of the Holy Spirit: 'Here is the Church. Here around this table. Christ is here, his gospel is being spoken, and therefore the Church is here. How do we make that simple but wondrous truth clear to our fellow believers?'...*[5]

In one sense, of course, they were right. Wherever Christians gather like this, in true faith in Christ and in submission to his word, Christ is in the midst. Their fellowship is appropriate and their desire to discuss their differences right and good. Not that everyone can do this, obviously: serious intellectual engagement between Catholics and evangelicals is complicated and some can do it better than others. Nor are warnings about the dangers involved necessarily misplaced. Nevertheless, private 'fellowship' is only one aspect of Christian experience. The public reality of 'church' has to be recognised and accounted for. Public acts and associations have wider implications than individual conversations, as much in secular matters as in the church. Diplomats, for example, sometimes enjoy friendships with colleagues from other countries, even with those whose national policies they oppose. Yet because their office involves matters of state, personal relationships have to be subordinated to political necessity. Public ceremonies may have to be avoided and uncomfortable negotiations endured. So also amongst Christians. Restrictions for the sake of principle and for the safeguarding of larger communities are unavoidable. Since it is impossible to be a 'private' Christian only, separate from the Body of Christ, institutional relationships have to be acknowledged. Sadly, what believers of different denominations enjoy privately as a result of their common personal faith in Christ, may not be possible publicly.

Whether wisdom was best served by the ECT conversations and statements is a matter of opinion, but certainly they deserve respect as a serious attempt to overcome unnecessary misunderstandings. One thing stands out clearly, however, and that is that when trying to assess post-conciliar Catholicism the focus of attention ought to rest not on individuals but on the larger realities of the church as an institution. Though we may enjoy wide agreement with individual theologians and statesmen, nothing should deflect us from the larger picture. A central feature of this today must include an honest assessment of John Paul's pontificate. This is not the whole picture for he is widely criticised within his own church, nor can predictions be made on the basis of present observations. Papal elections are notoriously unpredictable – as was the case with 'Pio Nono' in the mid-nineteenth century who began as a liberal and ended as the epitome of conservatism. However, the larger picture points towards a level of reaction and 'counter-reformation', as Alain Woodrow says, and this should serve as a caution, especially for those whose convictions the *real* Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries so strenuously opposed.

The papacy and Vatican II

When, early in his pontificate on 25 January 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene an ecumenical council like its predecessor, the First Vatican Council, it came as a complete surprise. The dogma of Papal Infallibility promulgated in 1870 seemed to obviate further conciliar debate. However, the pope knew that change was needed. Prominent in his mind was a desire to reach out to the 'separated brethren' of other Christian churches and, beyond that, to stimulate a new initiative for peace throughout the world.

The ultramontanism of the nineteenth century, the guiding principle of the church for a century and a half, was in need of revision. The Enlightenment and French Revolution had left Catholicism, like Protestantism, weakened and confused. North-European Catholics began to view Rome, and specifically the papacy and the curia (hence: 'over the mountains to the south'), as an ideal of centralized and invincible authority, the logical expression of which was papal infallibility. The changes initiated by John XXIII a century later simply recognised the limitations of this ideal. Defensiveness towards the modern world was no longer viable. However, the spirit of change, *aggiornamento* ('renovation' or 'bringing up to date'), quickly ran into difficulties. Conservatives feared it would lead inevitably to compromise. In any event by the end of 1965 and the close of Vatican II, the changes were dramatic. Conservative Protestants were agreeably surprised, though uncertain as to what they might mean in the long term – but so too were Catholics.

John XXIII was succeeded in June 1963 by Cardinal Montini of Milan with the title Paul VI. For many it seemed a case of *après moi le déluge*. The council's changes had been more impressive in their experience than in their definition, for key documents were left confusingly ambiguous. The atmosphere of renewal soon became a pretext for radicalism. The Society of Jesus, for example, initiated discussions at its General Council in Rome to alter its basic structures and training, something never before contemplated in its 400-

4 op. cit. p ix.
5 op. cit. p xii.

year history. Jesuits were also actively engaged in the liberation movements of Central and South America. Theological liberalism was rife. Hans Küng challenged papal infallibility and the Dutch hierarchy produced a new 'Dutch Catechism' which cast doubt even on the virgin birth. Conservatives and progressives both invoking 'the spirit of Vatican II' pulled in opposite directions. When the cardinals gathered in Rome to elect Paul's successor in 1978 they realised a strong and trusted leader was needed. In October, after John Paul I's 33-day pontificate, Karol Wojtyla was elected as the first non-Italian pope in 452 years and the first Polish pope in history. His magnetism and openness, his insistent championing of the poor, his outspoken commitment to the sanctity of life and the inviolability of human rights, immediately gained him wide acceptance and respect. And his public statements on the ecumenical direction of the Catholic church since Vatican II seemed to indicate a continuity with the past which his choice of name merely confirmed. Clearly a strong and charismatic leader had arrived.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, what conclusions can be drawn about this remarkable pontificate? It has seen historic developments as dramatic, practically, as any in the preceding century – in some of which, like Solidarity's triumphs in Poland in the 1980s, the pope himself has played a pivotal role. The year 2000 to which he has aspired from the beginning as a 'Jubilee', a 'new Advent for the human race'[6] and a possible turning point for the enlargement of peace, has arrived. But what has it brought ? Is his hope in any way related to the economic and political realities of the time – or even to Catholicism itself? What, in particular, has become of the spirit of change promised 40 years ago by Vatican II?

The picture is both ambiguous and troubling. On one hand Catholicism continues along a path of heroic change, as in the Pope's recent apology to the Jewish people. His open agenda, presented as it generally is with a theatrical flair, strikes a chord amidst the pluralist sympathies of the modern world. People admire his strength of leadership and apparent religious tolerance and see him as an agent of peace and goodwill. Inside the church, ironically, he is seen by many as an echo of the ultramontane centralism which Vatican II was intended to resolve. Without question he represents a traditionalist, some would say 'Polish', expression of the Catholic faith. Steadily by his appointments to bishoprics worldwide he has altered the theological complexion of the magisterium. Conservatives like Cardinal Ratzinger have been advanced to positions of influence. Recalcitrant theologians have been disciplined. Discussion of controversial topics like the ordination of women, priestly celibacy and contraception have been disallowed. The title of Peter Hebblethwaite's book, 'The New Inquisition?,[7] expresses the problem eloquently.

Equally troubling is John Paul's active support of Catholic 'movements' like Opus Dei, the Neo-Catechumenate, Focolare, Communion & Liberty – 'the New Evangelization'.[8] These are also strongly traditionalist and have been a concern to Catholics and Protestants alike. Though successful and dynamic, their recruitment strategies, and in Opus Dei's case secrecy, appear almost cult-like. The puzzle here is the relationship between an apparently progressive pope and an organisation like Opus Dei (with a membership of over 80,000) which is the object of suspicion within the Catholic church itself. In the years before his election he attended private meetings at Villa Tavere, Opus Dei's headquarters in Rome. Before the colloquium which led to his predecessor's election he prayed at the tomb of Opus Dei's founder, Josemaria Escriva, who died three years earlier in 1975. Soon afterwards he returned to Villa Tavere to give thanks for his own election – as he did recently to the shrine of Fatima in Portugal when he gave thanks to the Virgin for his deliverance from the assassination attempt in 1981. He also supported Escriva's beatification in 1994 (one of the fastest in recent church history) and granted Opus Dei its unique ecclesial status as a 'Personal Prelature', which in effect exempts it from normal episcopal control worldwide.

Here we could easily be misunderstood. Attention is drawn to Opus Dei simply to indicate the direction of John Paul's pontificate and its inner contradictions. He has become disenchanted with the Jesuits, traditionally 'the pope's men', because of their liberal tendencies both theologically and socially. By way of a conservative antidote Opus Dei has been promoted to a commanding position in the church. In many respects, interestingly, its conceptual genius is comparable to that of the Society of Jesus – the apotheosis of sixteenth-century counter-reformation.

Concerns

How is it possible to understand the pope's personal ambiguity? On one hand he is a fervent practitioner and advocate of Marian spirituality, taking as his motto the expression '*totus tuus*' – meaning 'everything for you' (Mary!).[9] He makes no secret of his opposition to liberation theology and to liberal theologians. Clearly too, Opus Dei and the other organizations of 'the New Evangelization' which he supports are traditionalist to the core. In these ways he is a traditionalist. At the same time he makes dramatic gestures of spiritual reconciliation towards those of other faiths, referring to Jews and Muslims as 'brothers in the faith', a term generally reserved for other baptised Christians. By comparison with earlier Catholic teaching, ecumenicity like this is a radical theological departure. So John Paul combines within himself two seemingly contradictory images – the traditionalist and the progressive.

This ambiguity, I suggest, stems from the deeper ambiguity of the Catholic system as a whole. The term 'separated brethren', for example, was unknown before 1962. Protestants could not be saved because they were outside the Catholic church – and so also believers of other faiths. But Vatican II reversed this. How? By means of its humanistic authority, the magisterium. Regardless of what Scripture teaches, and regardless even of its own traditional teaching, the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of 1965[10] introduced a universalistic interpretation of faith. Hence the pope's magnanimity towards Jews and Muslims and his Assissi prayer assemblies to which the religions of the world are invited. Similarly with respect to the reading of Scripture. Previously the Bible was placed on the Index of forbidden books. From the Council of Trent in 1559, lay Catholics were penalised for reading God's word.[11] Now Vatican II has reversed this. Since tradition is an equal source of authority, the church has the possibility to add to or subtract from the teaching of God's word or to appear at one moment progressive and at another traditionalist. In this sense the traditionalist and progressive distinction becomes irrelevant. The continuity of Catholic doctrine merely serves to mask the deeper reality – a humanistic authority which allows the church to act inclusively or exclusively at will.

The real problem

The real issue in the sixteenth century was not so much justification by faith, important as that was, but authority. The root question was what constitutes the governing principle by which every aspect of the church's life and thought is to be judged ? Is it the Bible alone or the Bible and Tradition together ? The Reformers insisted that the teaching of the church must be subordinate to the teaching of the Scriptures simply because this has been God's prescribed authority for his people from the beginning, first with Moses and the Book of the Law, then with Joshua (Joshua 1:8), then with the prophets and the rest of the Old Testament, then endorsed (and most importantly submitted to) by Christ himself, the divine Son of God, then by the apostles, and then by the early church fathers. The Reformers claimed that Rome had violated this principle both by misrepresen-

6 John Paul II, *Celebrate 2000!*, Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1996, p234.
7 Peter Hebblethwaite, *The New Inquisition? Schillebeeckx & Küng*, Collins, 1980.
8 on Opus Dei see: Peter Berglar, *Opus Dei: Life & Work of its Founder*, Princeton NJ: Scepter Publishers, 1994 (German original 1983); Fergal Bowers, *The Work*, Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1989; Robert Hutchison, *Their Kingdom Come: Inside the Secret World of Opus Dei*, London: Doubleday, 1997.
on Focolare & The New Evangelization see Gordon Urquhart, *The Pope's Armada*, Bantam, 1995, pp410–411.
9 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1994, pp215, 220.
10 ed. Walter M Abbott SJ, *The Documents of Vatican II*, London: Geofrey Chapman, 1967, p34.
11 ed. Don Kistler, *Sola Scriptura*, Morgan PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995, p14.

tation and by addition. Fundamental doctrines like justification by faith alone, carefully and dogmatically argued by the apostle Paul in Galatians 2–3 and Romans 1–5, and everywhere assumed in the New Testament, had been vitiated by medieval traditions like the mass, purgatory, relics and indulgences. Similarly, other teachings extraneous to the text had been imported from without. The new dogmas promulgated since then and accorded an equal authority with the ancient creeds, merely reinforce this, the Immaculate Conception of Mary in 1854, Papal Infallibility in 1870, and the Assumption of Mary in 1950.

The point is this: Catholicism's commitment to Tradition has undermined the authority of Scripture. Doctrines which appear nowhere in the New Testament are presented authoritatively. In this sense, and only in this sense, the Catholic church can be said to have a humanistic authority. Catholic disavowals at this point are familiar and Neuhaus quite rightly objects that all Christian churches have a magisterium of sorts, a teaching authority to which they owe allegiance. Tradition in this sense is undeniable. But it is a 'lower case' tradition, so to speak, and vastly different from the 'Tradition' of Rome, for though evangelicals may have made mistakes of interpretation in the past they have not yet introduced extra-biblical dogmas into their confessions. Catholicism has been sensitive about subtractions from scripture and shared common cause with evangelicals in resisting 'modernism' in the nineteenth century and 'liberalism' today. But the authority of Scripture is compromised as much by addition as by subtraction.

To speak of such a process as 'humanist' is misleading. Obviously Catholicism is not humanistic in any secular sense. But the term has value because it highlights the real issue. For evangelicals believe that the historic Christian faith is distinguished from all other religious and philosophical alternatives in two things principally: first in its non-humanistic epistemological authority, and second in its non-humanistic view of salvation. The knowledge required for the coherence and stability of all human knowledge is the divine knowledge revealed in God's written word. As the Psalmist says, God's word is perfect (Psalm 19:7). Similarly, the salvation which sinners need for a restored relationship with God is supplied exclusively by the Living Word, the divine Son. Salvation is a free gift to be received with empty hands (Romans 6:23).

Conclusion

With this perspective in mind, a return to the ECT statements leaves little room for confidence. How, one wonders, could Protestant participants have failed to draw attention to so obvious an ambiguity at the heart of the post-Vatican church? Or why amongst the many affirmations and agreements did the Catholic participants not include some negations of unbiblical doctrine and practice, like the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary, or, if not the Marian dogmas, at least purgatory and indulgences? The areas of disagreement were listed. But assuming that they desired the recovery of a more biblical faith and intended to inspire confidence amongst evangelicals generally, why did they not include repudiations like these?

The all-Protestant statement on justification by faith called 'An Evangelical Celebration', drafted in 1999 by RC Sproul and JI Packer as a response to 'The Gift of Salvation', underlines the significance of these omissions. Unlike ECT it constitutes an *unambiguous* statement of the evangelical view of *sola fide*. Though widely accepted by evangelicals of all stripes it has not yet been signed by any of the Catholic signatories of ECT, which is surely revealing.

Even a modest progress towards this sort of candour would have provided encouragement to those of us who sincerely look for change in the Roman Catholic church and who favour dialogue across the divide. At present, however, the failure to include simple and unambiguous denials of Catholic error by those ostensibly closest to a reformation view of renewal, creates lingering suspicions that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Remarkable as the post-Vatican II changes have been, and impressive as John Paul II's leadership and sincerity undoubtedly are, the echoes of counter-reformation remain.

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