

One Theologian's Personal Journey

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Abstract: John Thornhill here reflects on his personal and professional journey as a theologian. He recognises that the faith from which theology springs is concerned ultimately with reality, rather than doctrinal formulae, as its object. He recounts the changes in Catholicism and the world in the twentieth century as formative of his own theological vision. From his reflections, he sees the need for the present day church to open the treasures of its tradition and allow them to fuse with the vision of Vatican II for the benefit of non-academic believers.

Key Words: John Thornhill – influences; Catholic theology – 20th century; faith and theology; Catholic culture; existential imagination; political theology; Vatican II

How is one to tell the story of a life without becoming lost in uninteresting details? I had lived with this question for some days, when the answer came – as has often happened – in the early hours of the morning. I should tell my story from the end, rather than from the beginning. Destination achieved, the stages of one's progress become more meaningful.

My theological journey, I now understand, has been something of a quest. If the subconscious is at work as we seek to solve immediate problems, it also plays a part, I am sure, in determining the direction we give to our lives.

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG

In 1963, after I had been lecturing for a few years, I published an article, 'Towards an Integral Theology,'¹ that indicated the shape my theological project was taking. Theology, I saw, as a vast project in which faith makes use of a whole range of intellectual resources. Positive theology makes use of historical and literary criticism; systematic theology makes use of the principles of a realistic metaphysical analysis; pastoral theology makes use of a disciplined understanding of human culture, both individual and communal.

Clearly, *faith* was at the centre my theological awareness. As I prepared my first lectures – in Christology – I had sought an approach that would make my students' introduction to the Church's faith in the Saviour more than a set of dry theorems. Faith in Christ, I was convinced, should touch them at the deepest level of their existence and personhood. Though I did not use the term, I had turned instinctively to an interpretation of the faith that had its focus in the gospel. Looking back now, I link the 'something more' I wished to convey with memories of my own student days. In our youthful enthusiasm as seminarians, we read authors who promised something more than what we found in our theological manuals. For me, the writings of Abbot Columba Marmion of Maredsous Abbey

¹ *Theological Studies* 24 (1963): 264-277.

made a deep impression – the depths of meaning he found in the Pauline writings gave me a heightened sense of the ‘something more’ that faith had to offer.

The main thrust of the article I have referred to, it is evident, was a somewhat self-conscious defence of the critical realism of the Thomistic tradition. It was significant, however, that I was already learning to situate the claims of that tradition within the context of history and culture. I summed up the theological realism of St Thomas by quoting his words in a formula that has echoed in my mind throughout my life: *actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem* – which could be paraphrased: ‘beyond the credal formula, the believer’s act of faith attains the reality to which the credal formula refers’ (*Summa theologiae*, 2-2, q.1, a.2, ad 2). That this statement was not for me an empty truism, but the expression of a critical realism that was the outcome of a rigorous metaphysical analysis, I owed to my Marist teachers: Austin Woodbury through his brilliant exploration of the original texts of Aquinas, and Wilf Radford, Woodbury’s gifted disciple.

My philosophical education engendered a habit of mind that has been present to my thinking throughout my life. I cannot imagine what my theological development would have been without it. The fact that this benefit is not available to those who can contribute to maintaining the tradition of realistic thinking so fundamental to a sound theology is a matter of concern. The cumbersome curriculum of yesterday’s seminary had to be modified; but in the typical study program that has replaced it, the student’s introduction to philosophy is an eclectic survey of philosophical systems – scarcely sufficient, one would say, to develop the habit of mind essential to a metaphysical education.

With the passing of time, I looked to the work of Bernard Lonergan as providing a possible remedy for this situation. But my reading and reflection have left me confused concerning the relationship between the metaphysical habit I have derived from Aquinas and the methodology advocated by Lonergan.² Lonergan’s ‘The Origins of Christian Realism’ has proved a valuable resource in helping my students to appreciate the enduring validity of the early councils’ dogmatic definitions. Lonergan’s principle, that authentic subjectivity is the way to objectivity, and his emphasis upon intellectual conversion, seem very close to the position of Aquinas. Reading Lonergan, therefore, I expected to find much common ground; but I have been disappointed. His often-repeated rejection of ‘classicism’ (‘the mistaken view of conceiving culture normatively and of concluding that there is only one culture,’ *Method in Theology*, p.124) has left me puzzled. Surely one can recognise the plurality of cultural systems, and still hold that intellectual achievements are able to transcend the limitations of a particular culture and be communicated to other cultures. I can illustrate this from my own work. In writing *The Person and the Group*, as the Index to the work shows, I found that Aristotle’s understanding of social order, known through the life of a Hellenistic *polis*, was taken up by St Thomas, as his understanding of social order moved beyond the inadequacies of ‘political Augustinianism’ to affirm the proper autonomy of the political order. Several centuries later, Maritain made use of the same understanding as he collaborated in the formulation of the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, and John Courtney Murray did the same in his discussion of the implications of the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution. This ongoing conversation could scarcely have taken place if Lonergan’s intentional methodology were a *sine qua non* for a meaningful communication between cultural traditions. To take another example, when Lonergan advocates a shift from ‘faculty psychology’ to intentional analysis, does he

² I have tried to set out my basic metaphysical position in the Appendix to my *Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), ‘Aquinas on Understanding that is Aware of Itself.’

mean that he sees no lasting value in Aquinas' brilliant analysis of the potentialities of the human psyche – an analysis that I am convinced has unexplored potential, if it is related to the findings of depth psychology concerning the pathology of human emotions?

Perhaps the problem is that Lonergan's enthusiasm for his pioneering method leaves one with the impression that he is presenting an 'either or' proposition; whereas he is in fact open to a 'both and' interpretation. I am inclined to believe that this is the case when I find a thinker of the stature of Tony Kelly acknowledging his debt to both Aquinas and Lonergan.³ This deserves to be made more clear by Lonergan's followers, because the 'either or' impression I speak of is an obstacle to fruitful collaboration between the two traditions.⁴ The historical awareness becoming evident in my 1963 article was to have an increasing importance in my theological development. Its origins are easy to recognise. Rome is a living museum; and during my years there as a student I explored the city with the help of a French guide book that led progressively through the periods of Rome's long history. The cultural transformations reflected so vividly in the architecture and art of the eternal city led me to read Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*. Later, I chose to write my doctoral thesis on Toynbee's philosophical assumptions. With its wealth of material concerning the rise and decline of civilized societies, this work gave me an increased understanding of the cultural evolution that shapes human communities. This awareness found expression some years later, in 1968, in the publication of the work I have already referred to, *The Person and the Group: A Study in the Tradition of Aristotelian Realism of the Meaning of Human Society* – an interpretation of social order as a function of the pursuit of a common good, which included a chapter entitled, 'The Culture of a Human Society: The Common Good in Its Historical Realisation.'

THE CHANGING CULTURE OF CATHOLICISM IN ITSELF

Awareness of history and culture not only contextualises the life of the believing community; it also gives an understanding of the fact that the Church's life in the course of history gives rise to a shared culture of theological awareness that is subject to considerable variations in the course of time. This line of reflection was to be one of the most fruitful influences in my work. Later, John Henry Newman's *Essay in the Development of Christian Doctrine* helped to confirm and clarify my approach.

It may be helpful to indicate at this point some important moments in the development of this awareness. My reading of Louis Bouyer's *Life and Liturgy*, as a student, made me aware that doctrinal development is not always an advance; it can also be a regression. Bouyer demonstrated this in his survey of liturgical awareness in the

³ Tony Kelly has established himself as an authority on the thought of Aquinas (see his 'A Multidimensional Disclosure: Aspects of Aquinas's Theological Intentionality,' *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 335-374); his use of Lonergan's methodology is illustrated, for instance, in his valuable article, 'The Historical Jesus and Human Subjectivity: A Response to John Meier,' *Pacifica* 4 (1991): 202-228.

⁴ Since writing my text I have been alerted to Tom Daly's extraordinarily thorough and well argued paper, 'Conscience and Responsibility in the Unity and Complexity of the Human Person' (Catholic Moral Theological Association meeting, 2000), that makes clear Lonergan's positive appreciation of the metaphysical achievement of Aquinas. Having answered one question, however, he raises others for me. First, is it possible that in his attitude to 'classicism' Lonergan is really reacting against the conceptualism of the neo-scholasticism, so influential in Catholic thought in the mid-20th century? My second question concerns the starting point of a sound metaphysics. I have made my position clear in the final pages of *Modernity*. Does the Transcendental Thomism inspired by J. Marechal merely make clear to a post-Kantian consciousness the validity of my starting point, or is it unable to accept my starting point, which I judge to reflect the position of St Thomas?

Church's life. The implications of this came home to me at a personal level in 1959, as I prepared my first lectures in Christology. As I put together a text for my students I remembered Bouyer's work and decided to include an Excursus on the history of devotion to the Saviour. As I recall, Karl Rahner had recently published an enlightened study of the Sacred Heart devotion. I was astounded when my research made me aware that the image of the crucified Christ did not appear until the 5th century. I found it hard to imagine the faith awareness of a Christian community without the crucifix – a community of believers for whom the Cross was not an instrument of torture, but the bejewelled trophy of the victorious Saviour. Reading *The Church's Year of Grace* by the German liturgist Pius Parsch at this time provided a simple illustration of the cultural change involved. Parsch contrasted the 'objective' spirit of the age-old liturgy of The Exaltation of the Cross with the 'subjective' outlook of the commemoration of Our Lady of Sorrows on the following day. This 'subjective' outlook, with its emphasis upon compassion and compunction, found wide-spread expression the popular devotions through which – until our own day – many of our people have had their principal meeting with the gospel truth.

The far-reaching implications of this regressive doctrinal development were later brought home to me, when I read F.X. Durrwell's *The Resurrection* and the work of S. Lyonnet and L. Sabourin, *Sin Redemption and Sacrifice*. The former made clear how far popular awareness had moved from the outlook of the New Testament, and the other work criticised the inadequacy of an established Catholic culture that, since the Middle Ages, had come to see the saving work of Christ as essentially an act of reparation and propitiation.

One of the most illuminating discussions of the interaction of faith and culture I have ever read, however, and a work that certainly influenced my theological future, is M.D. Chenu's *La theologie au douzieme siecle*.⁵ Chenu's account, in this work, of the evangelical revival of the 12th century brought a new understanding of the complexity and shortcomings of the culture of Catholicism in the High Middle Ages. Monasticism was overwhelmed by its apparent triumph; and, as a consequence, Christian faith's dialogue with the gospel became increasingly difficult in a sacralised culture - 'in a Church which has absorbed the world, in a humanity where the triumphant serenity of the monastery held sway' (p.232). It was the mendicant friars who reacted to this situation, bringing to the common people the words of the scriptures in their own familiar language - releasing immense energies as 'the very words of the gospel made again their original impact and conveyed their intrinsic demands' (p.258). Chenu's text left me with the haunting phrase that has kept coming back to me ever since, 'the irreducible originality' of the gospel, an originality that must be related to on its own terms (p.252). The Reformation crisis was to show that - though this experience of the power of the gospel had the potential to prepare the Church for a more adequate response to the challenge it was to face - this potential had not been recognised.

My understanding of the complex evolution of Catholic awareness in the course of history made it clear to me that the 'irreducible originality' of the gospel, the ultimate concern of Christian faith, can not be captured in doctrinal formulas – however important sound doctrine is in the Church's life. Doctrinal formulas point beyond themselves to 'something more.'

⁵ Paris, 1957. References that follow are to this work.

HELPED BY MY MARIST CALLING

It goes without saying that sharing in the Marist tradition has been an important influence in my life. I joined the community of our international scholasticate in Rome in 1953. There I came to know Jean Coste, a French Marist who had just completed a doctorate in Lyons under S. Lyonnet – being afterwards invited to collaborate with Lyonnet. As a consequence of the upheaval that took place in France in the aftermath of the encyclical, *Humani generis*, however, he came instead to Rome to obtain a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture at the *Biblicum*. We became good friends; and I owe a great debt to my contact with his astringent mind and his generous spirit. His meticulous, inductive approach, as historian and biblical scholar, was a healthy corrective to my excessively deductive tendencies. Our frequent brief exchanges - between an adolescent admirer of Aquinas from the antipodes, and a cultivated scholar fresh from the heartland of the ‘new theology’ - taught me to appreciate the greatness of historical and biblical scholarship at its best.

But my main debt to Jean Coste concerns what was to become his life’s work, his researching and interpreting of our Marist origins. During his seminary studies, Jean contracted tuberculosis, and had to spend an extended period in a sanatorium in the mountains east of Lyons - the region where the first members of the Society of Mary carried on a ministry in remote parishes that had been without pastoral care during the turmoil caused by the Revolution. During his convalescence, Coste began to research these origins, and became convinced that a great story was there to be recovered. This work of recovery became his life’s work; having completed his studies at the *Biblicum*, he turned his back on a brilliant career in Scriptural studies and dedicated his talent to researching our Marist history.

Though the term was not in vogue when Coste began his research, prior to Vatican II, he was recovering the ‘charism’ that defines the Marist vocation. The ‘charism’ of a religious foundation is essentially related to the gospel – as, at a certain moment in the Church’s history, the ‘irreducible originality’ of the gospel inspires an individual or a group to minister to the needs of the times. The proposal of Francis of Assisi to take the gospel as his rule of life, *sine glossa*, is a classic instance. This intersection between the gospel and a particular historical situation brings to light a new expression of the gospel’s relevance in the ongoing experience of God’s people. If that ‘charism’ has an attraction and inspiration that transcends the situation of its origin, it lives on as a legacy of the foundation it inspired.

The Marist ‘charism’ is an example of this process. A group of seminarians pledged themselves at the time of their ordination, in 1816, to establish a ‘Society of Mary,’ to minister, under the name of Mary, in the chaotic situation caused by the French Revolution. Desperately short of clergy, the bishops in the two dioceses in which they found themselves were understandably reluctant to release them. For twenty years, a number of this group persevered in their resolve. With the passing of time, one of their number was moved to spell out what was to become the Marist ‘charism’: not the promotion of a particular devotion to Mary, but a life that identified with the spirit of Mary, in particular her commitment to all the Saviour stands for, epitomised in her selfless presence at Pentecost - leading the first followers of Jesus to the acceptance of the Lord’s commission to the twelve.

This approach was an effective antidote to the triumphalistic style many were hoping to revive as the Church entered the post-Revolution era. But it has a universal validity, giving expression to an inspiration that derives from the very heart of the gospel.

As I reflected on the new energies brought to all branches of the Marist movement, as our 'charism' was appreciated anew, I grew in awareness of the 'irreducible originality' of the gospel as the source of the Church's life.

INTERRELATED THEMES

I had come to understand, as I have said, that the truth that was the object of my quest was beyond the order of doctrinal formulas. Catholic theology has been slow to recognise the immense possibilities opened up by this perspective. This was due, one would judge, to the emphasis given to doctrinal forms by the defensive polemics of the post-tridentine period – an approach that was reflected in the 'neo-scholastic' synthesis that was so influential in Catholicism in the first half of the 20th century.

An article I wrote in 1979: 'Towards a Theology of the Good News'⁶ made it clear that the unity that I gave to my theological project was finding its focus in the gospel. The truth of the gospel could be described a 'something other, something new, something to come' towards which 'faith' is 'existence in receptivity and obedience' (W. Kasper). It is 'an intervention of God and his Son' establishing 'a new and definitive situation, the Christian order' (L. Cerfaux, summarising the teaching of Paul). It is the expression of 'the logic of love' whereby 'God enters into the life of the "other,"' and becomes human, in order to establish 'a communion of love' (M. D. Chenu).

Meanwhile, other related themes were providing a focus for my teaching. The approach I adopted in my text *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age*, introducing students to the study of theology, was structured around 'the Christ-event.'⁷

The theme of 'mystery' – that found its way into the title of the work just mentioned – also had importance for me, with echoes going back to my introduction to this Pauline theme by Abbot Marmion. It was Louis Bouyer, I believe, who made me uncomfortable with the phrase 'mysteries of the faith' – as indicating a lack of appreciation of 'the Christian Mystery' as the essential object of the faith. The approach I adopted in ecclesiology took its cue from the title of the introductory chapter of *Lumen gentium*, 'The Mystery of the Church' – with which the council turned its back on the juridical reductionism of the prevailing approach to ecclesiology. The central chapter of my ecclesiological text, *Sign and Promise*, entitled, 'The Terms of the Mystery,' presented the Church as a communion in the 'Christ-event.' Though reference to the Church as 'sacrament' and to 'evangelisation' point beyond concerns intrinsic to the Church's life, the bulk of the discussion of this text concerned these matters – reflecting the need for a renewed ecclesiology after the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium*.

I have described, in an article published in 1995, 'The Gospel: The Ultimate Authority in the Life of the Church,'⁸ how my involvement in ecumenical dialogues led to a renewed preoccupation with the 'gospel' theme – strangely neglected in Counter-Reformation thought. Clearly, a shared faith in the gospel, beyond the doctrinal stands of past controversy, offers a common ground in which a genuine if not complete communion can foster the trust that is needed if we are to follow the path that leads to Christian unity. As I said in that article, my experience in trying to promote this idea was a mixed one. In an informal way, however, the friendship I formed with Anglicans and Lutherans showed

⁶ *Australasian Catholic Record* 56 (1979): 235-246.

⁷ *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age: The Foundation and Task of Theology* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1991).

⁸ *Australasian Catholic Record* 72 (1995): 131-142.

me the potential of the approach I had in mind. It was an immense privilege to work closely with the late Jean-Marie Tillard, as a member of ARCIC II, and come to know this theological genius and his boundless zeal for the cause of Christian unity.

In the Australian Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, we had the joy of finding ourselves – contrary to our initial expectations – able to make a common declaration on the gospel. The recognition, that the gospel truth finds expression through a variety of mediums enabled us to understand the different approaches our faith communities have taken concerning this fundamental theme.⁹

EXISTENTIAL IMAGINATION

Recently a theological colleague, whose work I greatly admire, commented that my work showed pastoral good sense, while at the same time being theologically illuminating. I found his words encouraging, because they sum up what I have set out to achieve. If the work of a theologian is a ministry, as I am sure it is, it involves a relationship with believers that has something of the nature of a two-way dialogue. In 1988, I dedicated *Sign and Promise* ‘To those whose response to the Good News has taught me so much.’ I had in mind, not only the students of the campus where I was lecturing at the time, but also those who came to renew their faith through informal adult education initiatives I had been involved in. The response of believers to my interpretation of Christian faith made me more vividly aware of the ‘something more’ they had met through my presentation, and helped me to adjust my pitch.

Reflecting on this, I recognised that a theological interpretation that awakens and fosters faith awareness – like effective preaching – must be guided by ‘existential imagination’ – the capacity to enter into the deepest personal experience and concerns of one’s audience. Their response provides an indication of how successful one has been in achieving this. This existential concern is at the heart of Karl Rahner’s contribution to contemporary theology. I associate the phrase, ‘existential imagination’ with my reading of his *Hearers of the Word*, but I have not been able to find the words in the text.

In the 1979 article to which I have referred, I noted my debt to the example of Henri Nouwen and Jean Vanier in this regard. Because the message of faith is Good News to every human situation, the words of Carl Rogers – the originator of non-directive therapy – have been a constant index for me, as I have endeavoured to relate my theological presentation to the existential concerns of my audience: ‘what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element that would, if it were shared and expressed, speak most deeply to others.’¹⁰ As human beings, all of us, in the end, know the same fears, hurts, needs and hopes; and it is to these existential depths that the message of Christian faith comes as truly Good News.

This line of thought points to the essentially dialogical character of the whole project of evangelisation, something the outlook of a theology with an exclusive emphasis upon doctrinal forms found it hard to appreciate – as the debates of Vatican II have shown. Having been enthusiastically embraced by Paul VI and John Paul II, however, the dialogical

⁹ It was through the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue that I became aware of ‘The Gospel and the Church,’ produced by the *Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission*, Malta, 1971 – a remarkable text, especially in its section, ‘The Church and the World.’

¹⁰ Cited by Henri Nouwen in *The Wounded Healer*.

nature of authentic evangelisation seems certain to have an important place in tomorrow's Catholic theology.¹¹

FROM 'EXISTENTIAL IMAGINATION' TO ESSAYS IN 'POLITICAL THEOLOGY'

It is really only a small step from the 'existential imagination' I have been discussing to the methodology I employed in two works that could be called essays in 'political theology,' *Making Australia and Modernity*. Looking back again to my tyro effort of 1963, 'Towards an Integral Theology,' I recognise that its approach to a theological interpretation of cultural reality, sound as far as it went, was very inadequate, and embarrassingly naïve in its expectations of 'the nascent discipline which has been called metahistory.'¹² I needed the experience of participation in a living culture and much reflective reading for my awareness of history and culture to bears worthwhile fruits. In the end, however, it was an 'existential imagination' calling upon this experience that became my guide as I reflected upon the possibilities for a fruitful interaction between the gospel and the cultures in which I was a participant. I recognise how much I owe to Christopher Dawson in the development that prepared me for this task. Dawson's awesome scholarship gives one an appreciation of the complexity of human cultures that puts one on guard against hasty generalisations and simplifications; at the same time it helps one recognise the developments taking place in the broad sweep of history. I have always felt a kinship with Dawson since I heard his daughter quoted as saying that he used to lie awake in the middle of the night thinking 'Nobody reads my books!'

Making Australia had its origins in an existential need that was personal. In the wake of the nation's bicentenary, the country was experiencing a moment of heightened self-awareness. I felt the need to understand what we shared as Australians. This desire certainly had theological overtones: how should the Church minister within the context established by our distinctive national culture? I used the reading list of a well-established Australian Studies course as my basic guide in a field in which I was no specialist. My objective was to understand the development of our Australian way of life and its distinctive characteristics. Further lines of inquiry suggested themselves as my reading progressed – in particular, the nature of the interaction between Christian faith and its forms of self-expression and the ongoing Australian experience.

In the end, my study convinced me that – though it has not been sufficiently appreciated – there is a remarkable consonance between the values essential to the gospel and the way of life we have developed in this strange old continent: especially the wisdom learned in adversity that has produced an indomitable 'battler' spirit, and the good natured egalitarianism of our best self. The Public Lending Right Royalties I receive each year indicate that my text is still widely read in courses in Australian Studies and by the patrons of public libraries. I find it encouraging that the argument of the book makes some sense, apparently, to thoughtful Australians.

Modernity worked on a far larger canvas. A prolonged convalescence, in 1994, provided the opportunity to take up a question that had long troubled me. What must we make of the radical estrangement that has come to exist, between the creative forces of

¹¹ Paul VI, addressing the council after his election, 'The Church wants to engage all in the dialogue that conveys the gospel'; his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* spoke of the importance of dialogue at length; cf. also *Evangelii nuntiandi* no. 20 etc. On John Paul II see M. Lamb, 'Inculturation and Western Culture: The Dialogical Experience between Gospel and Culture,' *Communio* 21 (1994): 124-144.

¹² 'Towards an Integral Theology,' 274-275.

our contemporary Western culture and the ideals of Christian faith? To answer this question, one must arrive at some understanding of the culture of the West's post-medieval period - a daunting task, I knew, for one who is not a professional historian. On the other hand, the interest in cultural change that began when I studied the work of Toynbee and was further developed, as I read the works of Eric Voegelin and Christopher Dawson, left me with the conviction that there is sometimes a discernible pattern in the history of a culture and the development of its ideas.

I had, not long before, discovered Richard Tarnas' *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View*. It gave me heart to find that, though this author expressed a clear sympathy for the realistic philosophy of Aquinas, his text was being widely used in universities. A workable hypothesis began to take shape as I reviewed some of the works I had found enlightening. The studies of Robert Bellah and his colleagues (*Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*) pointed the way forward in many ways. Their underlining of the influence of 'value-free' social studies, and their assessment of the widespread influence of Locke's social theory reminded me of John Courtney Murray's criticism of Locke. I reread Maritain's proposal for an authentic humanism – critical of the contemporary West, but aware that the medieval ideal of Christendom did not provide a realistic alternative.¹³ I studied Charles Taylor's criticism of modern assumptions, in his *Sources of the Self*;¹⁴ and I took a more mature look at Voegelin's interpretation of history, as reflecting a 'differentiation of consciousness' - in particular his interpretation of the emergence of the outlook of modernity. Huizinga's superb historical study, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*,¹⁵ made it clear to me that the empty formalism of late medievalism almost inevitably provoked the reaction that disrupted the continuity of our Western cultural tradition. I had long been made aware, mainly through reflection on the nature of 'sacralisation' common to many cultures, that some of the Church's problems originated in a reluctance to accept the proper autonomy of the secular order.

Thus the basic thesis of *Modernity* emerged. The culture of modernity had its origins in a reaction against the inadequacies of late medieval culture and its traditionalism. It was a reaction that was justifiable and necessary, giving expression to the quest for excellence and truth – with deep roots in the Judeo-Christian and Hellenistic traditions – which is an outstanding characteristic of our Western civilized tradition. Today's problems derive from the fact that – as an accident of history – this quest became identified with 'instrumental' reason rather than 'substantive' reason (to use Taylor's terms). Because the 'scientific' rationality that came to animate our cultural tradition takes not account of qualities, values and purposes, it was unable to assimilate the existential concerns that have shaped the wisdom tradition of the West; and it now finds itself unable to find solutions for the human problems that are overwhelming the Western world.

I argued, further, that the sceptical nihilism of 'post-modernism' is really a loss of nerve before the problems of a project that still has the resources to undertake the self-criticism needed if it is to reappropriate the wisdom resources it needs to achieve its original objective – though this reappropriation is made more difficult by the ideological processes that have filled the vacuum left by the inadequacies of the 'scientific' approach.

I discuss the Church's response to this situation in the final section of *Modernity*. Clearly, it was my guiding principle of 'existential imagination' that helped me to recognise

¹³ *True Humanism* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954), remarkable for its time, being the text of lectures delivered 1935-6.

¹⁴ *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992).

¹⁵ *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London, 1998), first published in 1924.

the part wisdom must have in my interpretation. This line of reflection led me to suggest that the ultimate identity of the Catholic tradition is established by its call to provide a home for all forms of existential truth – an identity in other words that can not be expressed in any verbal or institutional formulation, but is constituted by an openness to the ultimate mystery that is the object of Christian faith. I was encouraged by the favourable comments of Protestant reviewers to this section of the work.

LIVING WITH VATICAN II

Before reading *History of Vatican II*, I knew that the council had been a determining influence upon my theological development; but this study made clearer to me the nature of that influence. Vatican II is far more than the preparation and promulgation of a set of authoritative documents.¹⁶ The historians responsible for this History - making an enlightening comparison with the great councils of the past and their aftermath - interpret the council as an ecclesial event that is still unfolding as the Church comes to terms with the decisions of the conciliar assembly. This event will be shaped, ultimately, by the 'reception' these enactments receive from the believing community. If the pattern recognisable in the great councils of the past is repeated, Vatican II will bring a renewed meeting with the gospel that has a lasting effect in the life of the Church.

In convoking the council, John XXIII's clear intention, according to the historical record, was to confront the Church with a momentous decision. Would it continue to live by the assumptions that shaped the Church's pastoral leadership in the long period leading to the pontificate of Pius XII – assumptions that in the judgment of the pope had long outlived their usefulness?

These assumptions derived from the Council of Trent's successful defence of the Catholic tradition; but they reflected the Church's reaction to a crisis, and did not serve the Church well as it faced the challenges of its contemporary situation. Doctrinal development was interpreted as implying current forms of theology and the pastoral administration of a highly centralised Roman bureaucracy to be superior to all that preceded them. These assumptions gave a privileged status to a tired and uninspiring neo-scholastic synthesis – that was in large part a heavily ideological systematisation of Trent's defence of Catholic principles. Pastoral authority had become defensive of the positions it adopted to a point of intolerant harshness. The triumphalism engendered by these assumptions – so scandalous to those outside the Catholic community – was symptomatic of an unconscious need to find reassurance in the face of a real poverty, that was evident in a reliance on canonical discipline to motivate the Church's faithful, rather than upon the energies derived from a meeting with the gospel.

Pope John was convinced that the post-tridentine era must be brought to a close and a new approach adopted, if the Church was to carry its mission forward effectively. But the pope was also conscious that he could not provide a blueprint for the new era. He saw intimations, however, of a renewed Church in the movements bringing new life, and in the outlook of the Church's leading thinkers – several of whom had been harshly dealt with by Church authorities. Trusting in the council as a moment of grace, and convinced by his familiarity with history, in the potential of a meeting of the Church's bishops, Pope John spoke of the council as promising a 'New Pentecost' – well aware of the momentous implications of this comparison.

¹⁶ I recently prepared, for the Clergy Seminar of Perth diocese a study of *History of Vatican II*, entitled 'Historians Bring to Light the Achievement of Vatican II,' that I hope to publish at a later date.

Against this background, I recognise that my life as a theologian – like that of many others – has been an involvement in the ongoing event of Vatican II. Having been freed from a mistaken sense of loyalty to the pre-conciliar assumptions I have described, I have been involved in the life of a Church that is coming to terms with the council's decision to inaugurate a new era. *History of Vatican II* has helped me to look beyond the discouragement I experienced when involved in the International Theological Commission, and when assisting the Australian bishops who attended the Synod that considered the sacrament of Reconciliation, in 1983.

This historical study has also helped me to interpret the teaching of Vatican II, and to understand more clearly the relationship between that teaching and my theological quest. In the edition published by the council's *Secretaria generalis*, in 1966, the documents promulgated by Vatican II fill almost 900 pages of Latin text. These texts have the unavoidable shortcomings and unevenness of documents that have been produced by a series of committees. Reading *History of Vatican II*, however, convinced me that this teaching must be interpreted in the spirit of John XXIII – not as providing a blueprint for the new era embraced by the council, but as pointing the way to the sources of new life that should animate this new era. Interpreted in this way, the council's vision is boundless in its potential - because it calls the Church to a meeting with the gospel itself.

The truth, when we finally grasp it, is usually very simple. For a long time, I have been convinced that the 'paschal mystery' is at the centre of the council's vision of a renewed Church. Why, I asked myself, has the 'paschal mystery' not emerged more clearly in Catholic awareness? I now realise that this theme only reveals its full significance when it is set within the full perspective of the gospel in its 'irreducible originality.' In this perspective, the 'mystery' that is the ultimate object of Christian faith (and therefore the ultimate gospel-truth) has three levels of actuality, as it were. Ultimately, this 'mystery' is the saving plan conceived from all eternity in the depths of the divine freedom; on the level of 'salvation history,' it is the disclosure of this decision on our behalf in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; and finally, it is the on-going actuality of the 'Christ-event' in the Church's life. It is this on-going actuality that is referred to by Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum concilium* as the 'paschal mystery.' Without a clear reference to the ultimate mystery of the divine decision on our behalf, the 'paschal mystery' is deprived of much of its immense significance. The 'paschal mystery' theme had little lasting impact on the *sensus fidei* of the Church (the animating principle of the 'reception' process) because this full perspective is little appreciated in the outlook of today's Catholics – unfamiliar as they have been with the 'salvation history' recorded in the Scriptures. In the council's teaching, in fact, the 'mystery' theme extends far beyond those texts that refer to the 'paschal mystery.' The liturgical constitution, in fact, in its opening paragraphs refers to 'the mystery of Christ,' opening up the full perspective I have referred to in a way that is echoed in other council texts.¹⁷

When we pursue an interpretation of the council's vision in the spirit of John XXIII, we recognise that this perspective gathers fundamental themes of the council's Constitutions into unity that brings to light their ultimate implications. The following come immediately to mind: Lumen Gentium's reference to the Church as a 'sacrament'; the 'ecclesiology of communion' it has embraced; the universal call to holiness and the universal priesthood of the baptised; and the potentialities in the Church's life of a

¹⁷ *Dei verbum*, no. 17; *Optatum totius*, no. 14. The small number of references opening up an awareness of the perspective I have referred to tends to confirm what I have said about a deficient Catholic awareness.

'collegiality' that gives full expression to the 'mystery' present in the local Churches' embodiment of the world-wide Church.

Similarly, *Dei Verbum's* various themes, as it calls for an authentic biblical revival, take on a new depth within this perspective. And the dialogue with the ongoing experience of humanity initiated by *Gaudium et Spes* finds its true focus within a perspective that owns the 'mystery' as the ultimate truth brought to the world in the Church's evangelising dialogue with the broader world.

What is important in this interpretation, is the recognition that these themes take on a validity far beyond the order of theological schools and fashions. They lead the believer to a meeting with the 'irreducible originality' of the gospel itself. For that reason I am convinced that the vision of Vatican II has an enduring validity; and that future ages may well look back upon the council as inaugurating the 'New Pentecost' looked forward to by John XXIII.

And it was through this recognition that reading *History of Vatican II* gave me a sense of having reached the goal of my quest. My theology, as I have said, revolved around themes expressing a living reality beyond doctrinal formulas: 'salvation history,' 'Christ-event,' 'paschal mystery,' and of course 'gospel.' The perspective that became clear to me, as *History of Vatican II* challenged me to interpret the message of the council in the spirit of John XXIII, showed me their ultimate unity as I had never appreciated it before. They all give expression to the 'something more' beyond which there is no more: the 'irreducible originality' of the Good News of a God who chooses to share all things with us, and invites us to make God's ways our own: 'The dazzling darkness and divine beauty of a love that gives without remainder, and which is poured out, in Jesus Christ, in the form of human powerlessness' (Hans Urs von Balthasar).¹⁸

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

History of Vatican II has given me a clearer understanding of contemporary developments in the Church – as belonging to the process initiated by the council. Historians Giuseppe Alberigo and Hermann J. Pottmeyer see the immediate aftermath of Vatican II as having two phases. In an initial phase, the goals of renewal are seen by many as able to be achieved through institutional and structural reform. The superficial optimism of this phase produces results that are disappointing and for many lead to disillusionment. A second phase is animated by the recognition that the real fruits of the council will come through genuine renewal brought by a new meeting with the gospel.¹⁹

Recently, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, president of the German bishops' conference, commenting on the situation of the Church in the aftermath of Vatican II, referred to a polarisation that has taken place, between, on the one hand, 'extreme progressives whose arguments have become thinner and thinner,' and, on the other hand 'extreme traditionalists who have become increasingly arrogant and overbearing.' Both groups, in his judgment, have done damage to 'the mission of the council.'²⁰ It is not difficult to relate the cardinal's assessment to the analysis of Alberigo and Pottmeyer. The fading voices reflect the disillusionment brought by a superficial understanding of the council's true

¹⁸ See S. Lyonnet, 'The Novelty of the gospel,' in *Evangelisation, Dialogue and Development*, ed. M. Dhavamony (Rome: Gregoriana, 1972), 87-104, a rich study in biblical theology, interpreting the many converging lines of both Testaments that point to the ultimate mystery of God's love.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Alberigo (ed.), *The Reception of Vatican II* (Washington, DC: C.U.A., 1987).

²⁰ Reported in *The Tablet*, 1 May 2004.

objectives in the first phase. The increasingly arrogant voices represent an unfortunate reaction to the upheaval and uncertainty brought by the council's decision to initiate a new era in the life of the Church. This polarisation prompts a couple of comments that indicate the way forward for Catholic theology as I see it.

I regret the fact that in the aftermath of the council Catholic theology became more and more a conversation carried on by an academic elite. The conversation carried on by academic theology has great importance for the Church's life. But it is unfortunate, if theologians lose sight of the needs of the people in the pews, and do not work to build bridges between old expressions of our unchanging faith and the vision of a renewed faith brought by the council. If the analysis of our historians is sound, this pastoral outreach is all the more needed in the phase of reception that can produce the council's real fruits.

The 'increasingly arrogant and overbearing' voices referred to by Cardinal Lehmann are a worry. The basic concerns of this group must be taken seriously. As Cardinal Ratzinger has pointed out, the Church's *sensus fidei* must be interpreted in a 'diachronic' perspective: today's popular opinion must be evaluated against expressions of the Church's faith in other ages – something clearly affirmed by John XXIII in his opening address at Vatican II. A desire to introduce the resources of the Church's long experience and traditions into the reception process of Vatican II is valid and laudable. But when those championing the importance of the Church's past adopt a restorationist attitude that is not open to the call of the Spirit in Vatican II, and introduce into the community of the contemporary Church a sectarian spirit, with overtones of disapproval of the loyal and valuable work being done in the nation's centres of Catholic learning, these voices become irresponsible and destructive. Recent publicity for a liberal arts college to be established in one of the nation's capitals left one with an impression of the sectarianism I refer to, rather than the prospect of a collaborative initiative.

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