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THE POPE JOHN XXIII LECTURE SERIES

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE CATHOLIC MOMENT

Richard John Neuhaus⁺

In 1987, while I was still a Lutheran, I published a book entitled *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World*.¹ There I argued that the Catholic Church is the leading and indispensable community in advancing the Christian movement in world history.² In evangelization, in furthering the Christian intellectual tradition, in the quest for Christian unity, in advocating the culture of life, and in every other aspect of the Christian mission, this was, I contended, the Catholic Moment.³

I am frequently asked whether I still believe that or whether the Moment has been missed, or derailed, or simply delayed. The short answer is: if the Catholic Church is what she claims to be—and about that I have no doubt—then every moment from Pentecost to Our Lord’s return in glory is the Catholic Moment.⁴ But the degree to which that Moment is realized in the little span of time that is ours depends on whether contemporary Catholicism has the nerve to be fully and distinctively Catholic.⁵

To be Catholic is not a private preference but a matter of ordering one’s loves and loyalties to the very public communal reality that is the Catholic Church. For others, religion may be what a person does with his solitude, or what people do together with their solitudes, but Catholicism

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1. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS, *THE CATHOLIC MOMENT: THE PARADOX OF THE CHURCH IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD* (1987).

2. *See, e.g., id.* at 283.

3. *See generally id.*

4. This is clear even from the text of the 1987 book. *See id.* at 287-88 (“The Catholic Moment is for the duration.”).

5. *See id.* at 288 (“The Church will endure until the End Time, but along the way it is ever being tested as to whether it has the courage to live in paradoxical fidelity.”).

is a corporate reality. It is what Catholics used to call a “perfect society”⁶ within the societies of the world, or what Vatican II, with essentially the same intention, calls the People of God.⁷ It understands itself to be an apostolically constituted community, and its distinguishing mark is communion with the Bishop of Rome who, alone among religious leaders in the world—and this is a matter of the greatest symbolic and practical significance—is not a citizen or subject of any temporal sovereignty.⁸

It is suggested by some that the public influence of Catholicism has been greatly weakened, not least by the scandals of the past year.⁹ The question of Catholicism in the public square, however, is not—at least not chiefly—the question of Catholic influence in social change or public policy, never mind electoral politics. Catholicism in the public square is a matter of being, fully and vibrantly, the public community that is the Catholic Church. More than by recent scandals, Catholicism in the public square is weakened by its gradual but certain sociological accommodation to a Protestant ethos—also in its secularized forms—that construes religion in terms of consumer preference and voluntary associations in support of those preferences. It is weakened also by what is aptly called the totalitarian impulse of the modern state—including democratic states—to monopolize public space and consign religion to the private sphere, thus producing what I have called the “naked public square.”¹⁰

6. See, e.g., Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* ¶¶ 63, 68 (1943); Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri* ¶¶ 13, 18 (1929); Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos* ¶ 6 (1928); Pius X, *Communium Rerum* ¶ 13 (1909); Leo XIII, *Libertas* ¶¶ 26, 40 (1888). All encyclicals cited in this Article can be accessed at the webpage of the Holy See, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/index.htm (last visited Mar. 3, 2003).

7. Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* ¶¶ 9-17 (1964), reprinted in VATICAN COUNCIL II: THE CONCILIAR AND POST CONCILIAR DOCUMENTS 350, 359-69 (Austin Flannery ed., 1975) [hereinafter *Lumen Gentium*]; see also John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* ¶ 18 (1979) (describing the Church as “the society and community of the People of God on earth”).

8. On the apostolic constitution of the Church, see CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ¶¶ 857-65 (2d ed. 1997) [hereinafter CATECHISM]. On the role of the Bishop of Rome in the unity of the Church, see *id.* ¶ 552. On the sovereignty of the Roman Pontiff, see Robert John Araujo, *The International Personality and Sovereignty of the Holy See*, 50 CATH. U. L. REV. 291, 359 (2001) (“The Holy See is a unique entity amongst other subjects of international law. Notwithstanding its uniqueness, the Holy See enjoys an international personality similar to that of other States.”).

9. See, e.g., Michael Paulson, *US Bishops OK Revised Policy on Sex Abuse*, BOSTON GLOBE, Nov. 14, 2002, at A1; Peggy Noonan, *The Pope Steps In*, WALL ST. J., Apr. 19, 2002, at A18.

10. See generally RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS, *THE NAKED PUBLIC SQUARE: RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (2d ed. 1986).

The second dynamic is evident on several fronts and is now at a crisis level in Catholic education, especially higher education, and in health care. At issue is the freedom of the Church to govern herself. It is not enough that there be a flourishing network of voluntary associations called Catholic parishes confined to doing religious things on Sunday morning and other appointed times. That is not what the Second Vatican Council meant by the apostolically constituted public society called the People of God.¹¹ The great Catholic battle of the modern era has been for *libertas ecclesiae*—the liberty of the Church to govern herself.¹² In America today, for reasons both internal and external to the life of the Church, that battle is being lost on some fronts.

In many ways, Catholicism in America is flourishing. It is far and away the fastest growing religious community in the country, with more than 160,000 adult converts per year,¹³ and patterns of immigration and youthful adherence that will likely expand its numbers far beyond the present 63 million.¹⁴ Contrary to the fears of some and the hopes of others, there is no evidence that the events of the past year will impede this growth.

In this country and worldwide, the two most vibrant and growing sectors of the two billion-plus Christian movement are Catholicism and evangelical/pentecostal Protestantism.¹⁵ John Paul II speaks of the new millennium as a “springtime of evangelization,” and there is reason to believe that is much more than wishful thinking.¹⁶ In this country and

11. See *Lumen Gentium*, *supra* note 7, ¶¶ 9-17.

12. In 1888, Pope Leo XIII, in discussing the separation of Church and State, disagreed with those in society who felt the Church should not have the power to legislate, judge, or punish, but should allow herself to be subject to the empire of the State. See *Libertas*, *supra* note 6, ¶ 40. This same debate has recently manifested itself in the context of the child abuse scandal, where numerous groups have called for more lay and/or secular control over the governance of the Church. See, e.g., Bob Keeler, *The Church Needs Its Lay People To Take Charge*, *NEWSDAY*, Feb. 17, 2003, at A22; Alan Cooperman, *Church's Revised Abuse Rules Stir Debate*, *WASH. POST*, Nov. 10, 2002, at A3; Charlotte Allen, *Houses of Worship: A New Voice*, *WALL ST. J.*, July 26, 2002, at W15.

13. THE OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY 2131 (2002).

14. *Id.* On the rate of growth, see the online tables extracted from Glenmary Research Center's *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States: 2000*, at http://www.glenmary.org/grc/RCMS_2000/Catholic%20rankings_tables.pdf (last visited Mar. 5, 2003). While the Catholic population grew at a smaller rate than that of some other congregations, its growth in numbers from 1990 to 2000 far exceeded that of any other group. See *id.* at 1 (Table 1).

15. See Carol Eisenberg, *Big Growth for Some Religions in the U.S.*, *NEWSDAY*, Sept. 18, 2002, at A24.

16. See generally JOHN PAUL II, *SPRINGTIME OF EVANGELIZATION: THE COMPLETE TEXTS OF THE HOLY FATHER'S 1998 AD LIMINA ADDRESSES TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES* (Thomas D. Williams ed., 1999).

elsewhere, we witness the beginnings of historic convergences between Catholics and evangelicals. Such cultural and moral convergences are not without political consequences, but more important are the spiritual and theological convergences that could reshape the Christian reality in the century ahead. In this connection, I warmly recommend a careful reading of Philip Jenkins' new book, *The Next Christendom*.¹⁷ So Catholicism is flourishing. The question is, with specific reference to America, how and in what ways will Catholicism be recognizably and vibrantly Catholic?

Three years ago, marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of *Commonweal* magazine, its former editor Peter Steinfels wrote an article, entitled *Reinventing Liberal Catholicism: Between Powerful Enemies and Dubious Allies*, that is, I believe, both wise and courageous.¹⁸ Since the dawn of modernity, said Steinfels, liberal Catholicism has been marked by several characteristics: a devotion to *libertas ecclesiae*; an eagerness to critically engage the culture; an understanding that the Church is in history and therefore necessarily involved in change and development; a devotion to unfettered intellectual inquiry; a recognition of the integrity and autonomy of distinct spheres of human activity; and an interest in reforming the structures of the Church in support of her apostolic mission through time.¹⁹ Heroes of this liberal Catholicism, according to Steinfels, include John Henry Newman and Jacques Maritain.²⁰ If this depiction of liberal Catholicism is accurate, we should all want to call ourselves liberal Catholics, which is another way of saying that, although Steinfels and others may have problems with this, we should be John Paul II Catholics.

Liberal Catholics, says Steinfels, have been riding high since the Council; they have largely defined what is meant by the "post-Vatican II Church."²¹ But now they are facing the "powerful enemies" mentioned in his subtitle, and, in this pontificate, liberal Catholics are viewed as suspect by Rome.²² Steinfels writes:

The most obvious and fundamental working difference between these [conservative Catholic] groups and liberal Catholics turns on the possibility that the pope, despite the guidance of the

17. PHILIP JENKINS, *THE NEXT CHRISTENDOM* (2002).

18. Peter Steinfels, *Reinventing Liberal Catholicism: Between Powerful Enemies & Dubious Allies*, *COMMONWEAL*, Nov. 19, 1999, at 30.

19. *See id.* at 30-31, 34.

20. *See id.* at 34.

21. *See id.*

22. *Id.*

Holy Spirit, might be subject to tragic error. Liberal Catholics believe that this possibility, which all Catholics recognize as historical fact, did not conveniently disappear at some point in the distant past, like 1950, but was probably the case in the 1968 issuance of *Humanae [V]itae* and cannot be ruled out in the refusal of ordination to women.²³

To these statements, this liberal Catholic (as defined above) responds that, of course, this pope can and has made mistakes. But what is now called liberal Catholicism is besieged and suspect because of its refusal honestly to receive the teachings of Vatican II as authoritatively interpreted by the magisterium and, not least, by the pontificate of John Paul II. Liberal Catholics joined with what Steinfels calls their “dubious allies” on the left in claiming that Vatican II called for a revolution, and they acted accordingly. It is now obvious that it was a revolution that was not to be. The now-failing revolution predictably provoked reactions of retrenchment, resulting in the toxic discontents of both right and left in American Catholicism. What has not been received, what has not been embraced, what has not been internalized, what has not been tried is the bold proposal of renewal and reform advanced by John Paul II. Although it now appears that their effort may be stillborn, those bishops who have in recent months been calling for a plenary council in the United States to solemnly receive the Second Vatican Council and its authoritative interpretation are, it seems to me, exactly right.²⁴ The way forward is the way of the Council that was and is. Thirty-seven years is enough – more than enough – time for bitter contention over the imagined Vatican II of leftist enthusiasms and rightist fears.

For decades, the Catholic left has called for a Vatican Council III to “complete” the work of Vatican II.²⁵ Others on the left, such as Garry Wills, dissent from that call, claiming that Vatican II put the teaching magisterium out of business once and for all, “diffusing” ecclesial authority throughout the Spirit-guided private opinions of the People of

23. *Id.*

24. See *Eight Bishops Propose New Plenary Council of U.S. Church*, AMERICA, Aug. 26, 2002, at 5. Bureaucratic pressure has blunted the call. See Gill Donovan, *Bishops To Consider Plenary Council Proposal*, NAT'L CATH. REP., Nov. 29, 2002, at 9 (reporting that the proposal faces two years of scheduled debates).

25. See *generally Blueprint for Vatican III*, NAT'L CATH. REP., May 3, 2002, at 11 (providing results of a request for suggested topics to be treated at a new council); International Initiative for a New Council in the Catholic Church, *Towards a New Council*, at <http://www.proconcil.org> (calling for Catholics to sign an online petition for a new Ecumenical Council) (last visited Mar. 3, 2003).

God.²⁶ This move is implausibly presented as what is meant by the *sensus fidelium*.²⁷ The burden of Steinfelds' argument is that liberal Catholicism made a great mistake in not distinguishing itself and, when necessary, separating itself, from its "dubious allies" of the Catholic left.²⁸ Turning from its intellectual and theological tasks, the Catholic left got bogged down in the canonical litany of leftist complaints about contraception, homosexuality, women's ordination, and clerical celibacy, along with endless agitations aimed at "power sharing" in church government—and all of these linked to the larger question of papal teaching authority.²⁹ Moreover, sectors of the Catholic left became increasingly part of a political and cultural left that is increasingly secularist and post-Christian, and even explicitly anti-Christian.³⁰ Liberal Catholics, says Steinfelds, should have made it clear that, in very important respects, these dubious allies of the Catholic left were not allies at all.³¹

The association with the Catholic left created, he wrote, a crisis of irony,³² a crisis of intellect,³³ and a crisis of inclusiveness.³⁴ The absence of irony and historical perspective led to fanaticism and a sectarian spirit. The refusal to make serious arguments nurtured anti-intellectualism and an emphasis on an ever-expanding inclusiveness, which emphatically excluded those not of like mind and resulted in a loss of Catholic identity.³⁵ The Catholic left, he says, has no patience with liberalism's devotion to "compromise, incrementalism, or extended analysis and debate."³⁶ "The Catholic left," he writes, "is an offspring of liberal

26. See GARRY WILLS, *WHY I AM A CATHOLIC* 237-38 (2002) ("Christ teaches through his whole church, not just through one part of it. . . . The people join in the entire church's witness to the truth by their acceptance of that which is proposed, showing the discernment infused by the Spirit.").

27. See *Lumen Gentium*, *supra* note 7, ¶ 12 ("The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one cannot err in matters of belief.") (citation omitted).

28. On the distinction between the Catholic left and liberal Catholicism, see Steinfelds, *supra* note 18, at 35-36.

29. *Id.* at 36.

30. *See id.* at 38-39.

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.* at 36 (describing the crisis of irony as a turning point, between 1968 and 1978, from irony to "deadly earnestness").

33. *Id.* at 37 (numbering the elevation of experience over analysis among the root causes of modern anti-intellectualism within both liberal Catholicism and the Catholic left).

34. *Id.* at 38 (stating that both the Catholic left and liberal Catholicism must reject a kind of theological promiscuity).

35. *See id.* at 37-38.

36. *Id.* at 36.

Catholicism, but rooted in the dramatic appeals and confrontational styles of the 1960s³⁷ rather than the liberal, and mainly European, tradition of the 19th and 20th centuries. But so smugly triumphalistic were liberals following the Council, while at the same time—and somewhat contradictorily—so fearful of their “powerful enemies” on the right, that few were, and few are, prepared to challenge the dubious alliance with the Catholic left.³⁸ The old maxim applied: the enemy of my enemy. . . .

Steinfels’ point about Catholic identity is of particular importance. One has waited for a long time for a persuasive answer to the question of why, if the canonical litany of left-liberal demands were met, Catholicism would not be very much like old-line liberal Protestantism, like the Episcopal Church perhaps, except very much bigger and with shabbier liturgical practices. The Catholic left has little interest in, or capacity for, addressing the questions of what makes Catholicism distinctively Catholic, and liberal Catholics have not called them to account on that score. With respect to Catholic identity, Steinfels writes, the attitude on the left takes the form of a question: “Isn’t [the question of what is authentically Catholic], after all, a task we can leave to church authorities, whom we will then feel free to criticize?”³⁹

There is among cradle Catholics of a left-liberal bent—and perhaps this is more evident to those who come into the Church later in life—an astonishing insouciance about the solidity and perdurance of Catholicism. Catholic identity, what makes Catholicism Catholic, is a question that will take care of itself or is somebody else’s worry. It is not our job, they seem to be saying, to maintain the ecclesiastical playground in which we pursue our deconstructive games.

This apparent insouciance may be a form of unshakable faith in the promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail.⁴⁰ But I think not. Rather, it seems to me, this insouciance—or to call it by another name, this recklessness—reflects an ecclesiastical fundamentalism that is akin to the Bible fundamentalism of some other Christians. It is indifferent to the incarnational reality of a Church subject to the trials, testings, distortions, inspirations, and mistakes of history. I do believe that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church, but we ought not to ignore the ravages wrought by the reckless confidence that unbounded criticism,

37. *Id.*

38. *See id.* at 37 (describing the fear among liberal Catholics that “open criticism of [the Catholic left] would only give ammunition to their conservative persecutors”).

39. *Id.* at 38.

40. *Cf. Matthew* 16:18.

conflict, and contradiction can do no serious harm. There is the harm of souls misled—and possibly lost; of intellectual and artistic traditions trashed; and of innumerable persons denied the high adventure of Catholic fidelity.

I recently had occasion to re-read Jacques Maritain's *The Peasant of the Garonne*,⁴¹ a book written in the months immediately following the conclusion of Vatican II in December 1965. Critics at the time called it a cranky book of disillusioned hopes,⁴² and there is truth in that; but it is also a stunningly prescient book that recognized what might be termed the hijacking of liberal Catholicism and its long-term consequences. As a liberal, Maritain has no illusions about what came to be called the "the pre-Vatican II church."⁴³ He knows about the anti-intellectualism, the suspicion of scholarship and science, and the stifling juridicalism of disciplinary measures. He writes:

All this was going to build up, in the unconscious of a great many Christians, clerics and laymen, an enormous weight of frustration, disillusionment, repressed doubts, resentment, bitterness, healthy desires sacrificed, with all the anxieties and pent-up aspirations of the unhappy conscience.

Comes the *aggiornamento*. Why be astonished that at the very announcement of a Council, then in the surroundings of it, and now after it, the enormous unconscious weight which I have just mentioned burst into the open in a kind of explosion that does no honor to the human intelligence?⁴⁴

The explosive reaction to the earlier repression, says Maritain, resulted in interpretations of the Council marked by a "kneeling before the world."⁴⁵ He leaves no doubt that he believes these interpretations are, in fact, misinterpretations—sometimes innocent, sometimes deliberate.⁴⁶ As for the Council itself, it "appears as an island guarded by the Spirit of

41. JACQUES MARITAIN, *THE PEASANT OF THE GARONNE* (Michael Cuddihy & Elizabeth Hughes trans., 1968).

42. See, e.g., Kenneth L. Woodward, *Angry Old Man*, *NEWSWEEK*, Mar. 25, 1968, at 59 (describing the book as a "scornful attack on every deviation from Maritain's own version of Christian truth").

43. See generally MARITAIN, *supra* note 41.

44. *Id.* at 49.

45. See, e.g., *id.* at 53-54.

46. See *id.* at 51 ("The Pope, putting things clearly in focus, reminded us that the *aggiornamento* is in no way an adaptation of the Church to the world, as if the latter were supposed to establish norms for the former; it is a disclosure of the Church's own essential position.").

God in the middle of an ocean which is overturning everything, the true and the false.”⁴⁷

The storm and its aftermath were powerfully evident a few years later in events surrounding *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 encyclical on human sexuality.⁴⁸ That moment marks, among other things, the point at which bishops largely—albeit in most cases inadvertently—surrendered their role as teachers. An orchestrated campaign of theologians and other academics publicly rejected a solemn magisterial pronouncement on faith and morals, and the world held its breath to see what would happen.⁴⁹ A few bishops tried to impose discipline, but they were not supported by Rome, and the result was that nothing happened.⁵⁰ Nothing, that is, except that it was now established in the minds of many that the Church pretends to teach with authority while bishops, theologians, priests, and the faithful are free to ignore what is taught.

Humanae Vitae, it is important to underscore, does not stand alone. The teaching that the conjugal act of love should be open to new life and not frustrated by contraceptive means is deeply rooted in centuries of tradition.⁵¹ *Humanae Vitae* reaffirmed that tradition, as did Pius XI when it was first thrown into question in 1930, and as has every pontificate since then.⁵² There is, I would suggest, no new argument that has not been addressed in papal teaching. It is true but entirely beside the point that most Catholics do not adhere to the teaching; most Catholics have never had the teaching explained to them in a manner that invites their assent. It is simply not plausible that liberal Catholics such as Newman and Maritain would not affirm that this teaching of the Church is binding upon the Catholic conscience.

Critiques of liberal Catholicism—where it went wrong and how it might be set right—such as that offered by Peter Steinfels are to be warmly welcomed. The concern for Catholic identity is on the mark, but I suggest that no identity is recognizably Catholic if it skirts the question of obedience. Here, too, we need the intellectual honesty and civil discussion for which Steinfels calls. We need to revive what Newman

47. *Id.* at 49-50.

48. Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* ¶ 6 (1968) (indicating that the conclusions reached by a commission convened by John XXIII “were at variance with the moral doctrine on marriage constantly taught by the magisterium of the Church”).

49. See Gustav Niebuhr, *Sex, Catholics And Papal Words; 25 Years Later, Encyclical on Birth Control Is Divisive*, WASH. POST, July 25, 1993, at A1.

50. See *id.*

51. See *Humanae Vitae*, *supra* note 48, ¶ 12.

52. See, e.g., Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* ¶ 54 (1930); John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* ¶ 13 (1995).

called the “grammar of assent”⁵³ in recognizing that, on controverted questions such as artificial contraception and the Church’s inability to ordain women, the Church calls for the obedience of external and internal assent.⁵⁴ I know that intellectual obedience is a scandalous idea in our time. And not only in our time, for it has been a stumbling block to many over the centuries. What is sometimes called “ecclesial faith,” as distinct from “divine faith” or “religious submission,” is an inseparable part of what it means to be Catholic, of what it means for our loves and allegiances to be rightly ordered.⁵⁵ Contrary to modern doctrines of autonomy, there is nothing demeaning about obedience. The word is from the Latin *oboedio* and means “to give ear,” “to listen to,” “to obey.”⁵⁶

Accepting full intellectual and moral responsibility for his decision, the Catholic decides to whom to listen, whom to follow, and, come the crunch, to whom to submit. The Catholic believes that, in the apostolically constituted community of faith, the bishop of Rome is Peter among us. The Catholic believes that the words of Jesus, “He who hears you, hears me,”⁵⁷ have abiding historical applicability until the end of time. The bishops teaching with and under Peter can teach infallibly.⁵⁸ Infallibility means that the fullness of apostolic authority will never be invoked to require us to believe anything that is false.⁵⁹ The relationship

53. See generally JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, AN ESSAY IN AID OF A GRAMMAR OF ASSENT (Longmans, Green, and Co. 1903) (1870).

54. See CATECHISM, *supra* note 8, ¶ 169 (“Salvation comes from God alone; but because we receive the life of faith through the Church, she is our mother. . . . Because she is our mother, she is also our teacher in the faith.”).

55. Compare *id.* ¶ 153 (“Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him.”) with *id.* ¶ 168 (“It is the Church that believes first, and so bears, nourishes, and sustains my faith.”).

56. A NEW LATIN DICTIONARY 1239 (Charlton T. Lewis & Charles Short eds., 1907).

57. Luke 10:16.

58. *Lumen Gentium*, *supra* note 7, ¶ 25.

Although the bishops, taken individually, do not enjoy the privilege of infallibility, they do, however, proclaim infallibly the doctrine of Christ on the following conditions: namely, when, even though dispersed throughout the world but preserving for all that amongst themselves and with Peter’s successor the bond of communion, in their authoritative teaching concerning matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement that a particular teaching is to be held definitively and absolutely.

Id.

59. See *id.* (“Bishops who teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff are to be revered by all as witnesses of divine and Catholic truth. . .”).

between freedom and faith is set forth in Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:

It is, however, only in freedom that man can turn himself towards what is good. The people of our time prize freedom very highly and strive eagerly for it. In this they are right. Yet they often cherish it improperly, as if it gave them leave to do anything they like, even when it is evil. But that which is truly freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in man. . . . Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint.⁶⁰

I may not understand an authoritative teaching of the magisterium, I may have difficulties with a teaching, but, as Newman understood, ten thousand difficulties do not add up to a doubt, never mind a rejection.⁶¹ I may think a teaching is inadequately expressed and pray and work for its more adequate expression in the future. But, given a decision between what I think the Church should teach and what the Church in fact does teach, I decide for the Church. I decide freely and rationally—because God has promised the apostolic leadership of the Church guidance and charisms that he has not promised me; because I think the magisterium just may understand some things that I don't; because I know for sure that, in the larger picture of history, the witness of the Catholic Church is immeasurably more important than anything I might think or say. In short, I obey. The nuances of such obedience, of what is meant by “thinking with the Church” (*sentire cum ecclesia*), are admirably spelled out in the 1990 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*.⁶² It is an

60. Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*) ¶ 17 (1965), reprinted in VATICAN COUNCIL II: THE CONCILIAR AND POST CONCILIAR DOCUMENTS 903, 917 (Austin Flannery ed., 1975).

61. See JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA* 238-39 (Longmans, Green, and Co. 1908) (1865).

Many persons are very sensitive of the difficulties of Religion; I am as sensitive of them as any one; but I have never been able to see a connexion between apprehending those difficulties, however keenly, and multiplying them to any extent, and on the other hand doubting the doctrines to which they are attached. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as I understand the subject; difficulty and doubt are incommensurate.

Id.

62. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (1990). See, e.g., *id.* ¶ 35 (“The ‘sensus fidei’ implies then by its nature a profound agreement of spirit and heart with the Church, ‘sentire cum Ecclesia.’”). The *Instruction* is available on the webpage of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,

instruction that can be read with enormous benefit also by those who are not professional theologians. My point is this: liberal Catholicism cannot be reinvented, it cannot be rehabilitated, it will not be vibrantly Catholic, until it candidly and convincingly comes to terms with obedience.

The great question—a question that has ramifications that go far beyond assent to Catholic teaching—is the relationship between freedom and obedience—or, more precisely, between freedom and truth. The question includes ecclesial obedience to the truth, as Catholics believe the truth is made known. We are bound by the truth, and when we are bound by the truth, we are bound to be free.⁶³ The relationship between truth and freedom is as true for non-Catholics or, indeed, for non-Christians as it is true for Catholics, as is magnificently argued by John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor (The Splendor of Truth)*.⁶⁴ What went wrong with aspects of liberal Catholicism went wrong long before the 1960s. What went wrong was the submission to an Enlightenment or rationalist tradition of the autonomous self—found also in a romanticism that too often mirrored what it intended to counter. Still today there is a liberal Catholic reflex, shared by secular liberalism, against the very ideas of authority, obedience, and the truth that binds. The Catholic insight about human freedom, an insight that we dare to say has universal applicability, is that we are bound to be free.⁶⁵ The truth, in order to be understood, must be loved, and love binds. And so also with the apostolic community that embodies and articulates the truth.

Coming to terms with the question of obedience means coming to terms with the one who said, “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”⁶⁶ The modern regime of secular liberalism adopted the slogan, “the truth will make you free,” but pitted it against the one who is the truth. More radically, it pitted truth and freedom against any authoritative statement of truth, and against authority itself. The liberal ideal was that of the autonomous, untethered, unencumbered self. The consequence of that impossible ideal is conformity to the delusion of

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/index.htm (last visited Mar. 4, 2003).

63. Cf. *John* 8:31-32.

64. See John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* ¶¶ 84-87 (1993).

65. See *id.* ¶ 86 (“Human freedom belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly. It is an essential part of that creaturely image which is the basis of the dignity of the person.”); *id.* ¶ 87 (“Christ reveals, first and foremost, that the frank and open acceptance of truth is the condition for authentic freedom. . .”).

66. *John* 8:31-32.

autonomy or, as the history of the last century so tragically demonstrates, blind submission to totalitarian doctrines that present themselves as surrogates for the truth that makes us free.

The “dubious ally” that has done in liberal Catholicism again and again is the conceptual regime of secular liberalism and its misconstrual of the connection between freedom and truth. The result is liberal Catholics who insist that they belong—“once a Catholic, always a Catholic”—but it is a belonging without being bound. Let it be admitted that this is true of all of us—in different ways and to a greater or lesser extent. There is perhaps no greater obstacle to our entering upon the high adventure of Catholic fidelity than modernity’s perverse idea of freedom, an idea that we breathe with the cultural air that surrounds us. And there is important truth in the maxim “once a Catholic, always a Catholic.” The baptism by which we are indelibly marked is an abiding bond and a magnetic force drawing us always toward the completeness of the conversion to which we are called.⁶⁷ That conversion is perfected in obedience to the truth that freedom is discovered in obedience to the truth. For the Catholic, such obedience can in no way be separated from the community that St. Paul describes as the “household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth.”⁶⁸

And so I end where I began. The question is whether Catholicism will be Catholic. The historical and sociological dynamics to which I alluded earlier have led to a serious unraveling, an unraveling gleefully celebrated and encouraged by the Catholic left. Liberal Catholicism, rightly understood, is an honorable tradition and could today be a source of renewal, but that depends upon its capacity and readiness to receive the invitation—an invitation so powerfully and persistently issued by this pontificate—to enter upon the high adventure of fidelity to the truth.

At the end of his aforementioned essay, Peter Steinfels lists five developments the Church must address in the new millennium: human sexuality, technological control over genes and minds, relations among world religions, changes in historical consciousness and cultural pluralism, and the meaning of individual freedom and democracy.⁶⁹ Through encyclicals and other teaching documents, John Paul II has for twenty-four years, in obedience to the spirit and the letter of Vatican II, addressed each of those questions comprehensively, repeatedly, with

67. CATECHISM, *supra* note 8, ¶ 1280 (“Baptism imprints on the soul an indelible spiritual sign. . .”).

68. 1 *Timothy* 3:15.

69. Steinfels, *supra* note 18, at 39.

formidable intelligence and persuasive force.⁷⁰ But, with notable exceptions, his witness has not been received: not by bishops, not by priests, not by catechists, not by traditionalists who think Vatican II was a mistake, and not by liberal Catholics who incessantly pit Vatican II against the living magisterium of the Church.

We very much need bishops who are teachers of the fullness of the faith. Perhaps God has given us the bishops we have in order to test our faith, but we know that the purpose of the episcopal office is not limited to providing spiritual trials, as salutary as spiritual trials may be. Above all, and this applies to all, we need a conversion to *oboedio*—to responsive listening, to lively engagement, to trustful following, to the form of reflective faith that is obedience. The word went forth from the Second Vatican Council, and I believe in God’s promise in Isaiah 55 that “my word . . . shall not return to me void.”⁷¹

After more than three decades of confusion, contention, and conflicts that have long since become a bore to serious people, we are perhaps on the edge of genuinely receiving the Council and the living magisterium of which the Council is part: the living magisterium apart from which there would be no Council, apart from which the Council cannot be rightly understood. If so, the Catholicism that is flourishing now and will likely flourish in the future will be believably and vibrantly Catholic. If so, the consequences for the Christian movement in world history are inestimable. I believe this could happen. In fact, were I writing a book about this promise and possibility, I might very well borrow a title from myself and call it *The Catholic Moment*.

70. See, e.g., *Evangelium Vitae*, *supra* note 52 (discussing the inviolability of human life in every form); *Veritatis Splendor*, *supra* note 64 (arguing that real freedom and truth come from God); John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) (calling on the Church to renew its commitment to evangelize the world and engage in interreligious dialogue); *Redemptor Hominis*, *supra* note 7 (announcing the hopes of the new pontificate).

71. *Isaiah* 55:11.