

The Reformation Revisited

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These meetings offer a forum where it is natural and appropriate to discuss issues of somewhat domestic concern to Catholics. I mention this in case any should expect from the title another reappraisal of contemporary Reformation scholarship. That is not my purpose, except perhaps incidentally. The "Revisit" to which my title alludes is the revisiting of the Reformation which the Catholic Church is now experiencing in the years following the Second Vatican Council, and my purpose this morning is to consider the parallels, and the differences, between these two periods of revolutionary change. I hope that in doing this we may to some degree increase our understanding of both the Reformation and the *Aggiornamento*.

I

"Many avoid theology these days from fear of wavering in their Catholic faith, since they see there is nothing that is not called into question." – Erasmus, *Confabulatio pia*, 1522.

It is generally conceded by contemporary historians of the Reformation that the issue of corruption in the Church must be reappraised. By treating it for so long as a "cause" of the Reformation, we have found the need to examine it more precisely for what it tells us of the deeper failures in the relations between the institutional Church and European society. It is evident that the Church of fifteenth century Europe had lost both its capacity to contain the spiritual aspirations of the people it was professing to serve, and its ability to change itself internally to meet this crisis. Put another way, corruption was not new in the fifteenth century. It is endemic in the life of the

Church; indeed, it began at the Last Supper. What is interesting is its running contest with reform. Up to the thirteenth century, the Church always rallied successfully from its periods of decadence and managed to contain and use the new spiritual forces which would be unleashed in these times of tension and protest. From the fourteenth century on, we are aware that this process is coming to a halt. There is a kind of stasis in the circulation of vital forces. New movements, instead of being domesticated, are driven out and persecuted. The last great adaptation was that represented by the foundation of the mendicant orders, and the appearance of the Inquisition under Dominican auspices was a malign symptom that the mendicants' successful adoption of the most valid ideals of the heretical movements they displaced – a life of radical poverty and of evangelical preaching – came too late for many who were alienated from the common life of Christendom.

By the fifteenth century, we see massive evidence that this alienation is becoming *very* widespread indeed. Within the Church we find a devotional life which was often lost in peripheral matters and perverted by dark obsessions. Outside the Church we have the recurrence of heretical movements – the Beguines, the Fraticelli, the Franciscan Spirituals, the various apocalyptic movements – all of which find a common theme, interestingly enough, in their concern with poverty. Why poverty? Hans Baron long ago indicated the significance of this concern to the humanists, its adoption from Franciscan sources and its symptomatic importance to men attempting to reconcile the Stoic ideal of a life of private contemplation with the demands of civic activism. I suggest, however, that there are additional elements, away from the concerns of humanist circles. The conscious cult of poverty is in any age perhaps the most conspicuous repudiation of the preoccupations of a corrupt society; it is the banner of alienation from a fallen order, and it is also, traditionally, the ground for the rediscovery of a new sense of community.¹

Apart from these symptoms of a deep spiritual disquiet, there was the complementary evidence that the structure of authority in the Church itself – so imposing in theory – was in practice dismayingly ineffective. In 1454, Aeneas Sylvius, the aging, cultivated humanist, wrote to a friend “Christendom has no head whom all will obey – neither the pope nor the emperor receives his due. For there is no reverence and no obedience.” In four more years he himself would be Pope. In ten more years he would be dead, with the problems that he half-understood, unsolved, and his single greatest project, an unregarded crusade, wholly forgotten. He is a symptomatic figure.

¹ Hans Baron, “Franciscan Poverty and Civic Wealth as Factors in the Rise of Humanistic Thought,” *Speculum* XIII, no. 1 (1938) pp. 1-37; cf. G. B. Ladner, “Homo viator: Medieval Ideas on Alienation and Order,” *Speculum* XLII, no. 2 (1967) pp. 233-59.

No pope of the time was more honest, none understood better the new intellectual forces at work in Europe. Above all, his own career illustrated the dilemma of the pre-Reformation Church: wealthy, powerful, a patron of capital and of learning, it was nevertheless unable to respond to the challenge to which these very assets pointed, with anything but outdated gestures, the institutional and disciplinary equivalents of Crusades, gestures which did nothing to disguise – and indeed made only more evident – the Church’s failing prestige and authority. Excommunications and interdicts multiplied, by their very frequency discrediting the sacramental system they were supposed to uphold. The *respublica Christiana* was disintegrating between the rivalries of the new monarchies, the pressures from the East and the new competition to partition the world opening to the West. Gone was the common faith in a Christian boundary under universal canon law and the automatic jurisdictional power of Rome. In the East, the Papacy had already admitted, by its own arrangements with the Turks, that political dominion might be justified regardless of belief; in the West, Spain and Portugal were learning to make their own decisions with only a formal acknowledgment of Papal pretensions over princes. Thus Aeneas Sylvius, who as Pius II would die in the summer heat of Ancona awaiting Venetian galleys which never came to lead a Crusade which never sailed, mused, “We look on Pope and Emperor as figureheads and empty titles. Every city state has its king and there are as many princes as there are households.”

So the fifteenth century was for European Christendom – as our present century is for us – a time of profound anxiety, and for rather similar reasons. It was not simply the anxiety of an impending disaster – a visitation of plague or of Norsemen. It was something far more profound, an uneasy awareness, amidst much evidence of increasing prosperity and material success, of a fundamental shift in the forces which had created Christendom, of deep, seismic pressures in the cultural landscape, which were already threatening to engulf old landmarks with thrusts that defied all efforts at containment. Some of the evidence for this lies closely gathered upon the pages of Huizinga’s *Waning of the Middle Ages*. More is found in the efforts of a few contemporaries of genius to understand it. In More’s *Utopia*, Machiavelli’s *Prince*, and Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, we find three outstanding examples of such an attempt, all sharing – amid radical differences – one outstanding feature, an awareness that the present situation of Europe had to be quite freshly described against the contrasting background of the old order – the “true” order – which for so long had stood unchallenged as an accurate account of the state of things.

This awareness of a glaring contrast between the alleged true order and the actual state of European Christendom is one measure of the Church’s failure to respond to the new social and spiritual forces. These were forces

which were generated, by and large, by the growing class of educated laymen in the cities. This has been too often discussed to require extended comment here, but it is also too relevant to our theme to be entirely passed over. It is plain that the core of the discontent, and with that the most important leadership for change, came from this group and its adherents. It began, of course, where urban life first ripened apart from close association with the predominant feudal culture of the North – in Italy. From the eleventh century, Italy had been the centre of exchange between the Eastern Mediterranean and Western and Northern Europe. In Italy, and those parts of Europe touched by Italian enterprise, capitalism was well established by 1300, and with urban capitalism came the first literate economy in Europe. Bills of sale, contracts, letters, journals, ledgers – these were the undramatic heralds of a new society in which the most revolutionary instrument in the hands of men would be the printing press. Francesco Datini, merchant of Prato, left at his death some 500 ledgers, over 150,000 letters, hundreds of deeds, insurance policies, bills of exchange and great, beautifully bound *libri grandi* – double entry ledgers for each of his houses in partnership, each headed with a motto which announces a spirit which historians have wanted to call “Protestant,” but which in fact emerged in the heartland of Catholic Europe – “In the name of God and of profit.”²

Here was the interior frontier of the European spirit, not in the North, languishing under a decadent and nostalgic feudalism, but in the southern city-states, which provided a natural environment for the rebirth of classical ideals. Until 1300, Italian culture had been out of touch with the dominant feudal and ecclesiastical culture centered in the French court. Suddenly, about 1300, Italy erupted and the generation of Dante and Giotto began a cultural hegemony which lasted for two centuries.

It was to be the turn now of the educated, urban layman, aristocratic in outlook to be sure, but neither feudal nor chivalric. The Italian universities had always been dominated, not by the study of theology, but by the professions – law and medicine – and by natural philosophy, Averroism; and there was increasing devotion outside the universities to classical culture, where these citizens of urban republics found models and kindred spirits in the past. All of this sprang from lay education in the city communes. In the early fourteenth century, it is estimated, eight to ten thousand boys and girls were learning to read in Florence; and the communes provided the job opportunities for which their education prepared them: they were run by administrators, bureaucrats and jurists who were laymen. The result was not merely a new professional ideal; as all know who read their works, they had

² Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato, Francesco di Marco Datini*, London, 1957, c. 6.

truly a spirit which Europe had never before seen in such fervent concentration. There was intense awareness of personality and events, a tendency to analytical introspection, and at all times a great sensitivity to the world around. In the established religious life of Europe, they found little that was pertinent to the society they were creating.

Were they anti-religious? Not necessarily. The new culture was wealthy, aristocratic, urban and secular, to be sure, but it was a complement to Christianity, not a rival to it – at least, not yet. It was a lay morality alongside that of the clergy and monks and knights, full of promise as a secular ideal of virtue and the good life. With all of this went something else that was new, a sense of the past. They strove for the ability to place themselves in time with respect to previous ages; they were aware of historic distance. It was this, precisely, which gave them the sense that they were starting something new.

If they did not challenge Christianity as such, they did offer a challenge to the mediaeval corporate ideal, where men and institutions were seen in the light of their functions, functions which contributed to the total welfare of a universal Christian society in organic harmony. This was the ideal; the actuality was different, and the difference was especially obvious in Italy. The Italian city-states were ambitious, self-centered, and individualistic, and so, by and large, were their citizens. From Renaissance Italy, therefore, emerged the new ideal of freedom for personal development.

Like the mediaeval idea, which consciously drew upon the Pauline notion of the organic unity of the Christian community, the Renaissance ideology also had its religious aspect. It recalled the old Christian theme of the dignity of human nature and the greatness of every individual soul. But life for these Christians was no longer simply a struggle and a pilgrimage; rather, it was a fine art – the art of harmonious development of body and mind in all their activities. It was, as we have said, a markedly aristocratic ideal, but it was the ideal of an élite open to creative and intellectual ability. Brains before birth: that was their social creed. Of course it was best to have both.

Now the propagators of this new cultural doctrine, the feverish bearers of the virus, were the humanists. Apart from being the sponsors of a literary science which could have devastating implications for some long-sustained myths, the humanists were élitists with an ideal of state service which appealed to the lay intelligentsia; and by and large, they were often Platonists as well. Their Platonism in the first place represented a reaction against Aristotelianism; it was also new and literary, poetic and spiritual. The Florentine Academy founded by Cosimo di Medici in 1462 with Picino as life-endowed resident scholar was in many ways the first "free university," making philosophy available outside the Schools. They were also, of course,

the pioneer students of the biblical languages, an outgrowth of the humanists' impassioned concern to revive the true culture of antiquity. This enterprise was sustained and indeed, to a large extent, was made possible by the appearance of the printing press, without which the international humanist community simply could not have worked.

It is clear that there was much in all of this which would embarrass mediocre traditionalists; it also seems clear that it contained the germ of a great Christian revival. Before we turn to their programme for that revival, we should perhaps pause to consider if there was anything in humanism that was essentially subversive of Christianity. We will discount their satire of abuses in the Church and the critical work of Valla on such ecclesiastical monuments as the Donation of Constantine; but it is possible, I think, to detect some trends which contained the possibility of an open rupture with Christian orthodoxy. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, there is a marked inclination to mute the Incarnational aspect of Christianity, especially where Platonism enters the humanist stream. The Incarnation of course they acknowledged, but the thing that made them breathe more quickly was the thought of God's immanence. A favourite text came from the great Johannine prologue: "the light that lights every man that comes into the world." Interpreted in neo-Platonic terms as metaphysical light, it became a Form which must be united with all matter if it is to be capable of visibility. God and Christ, then, permeate all reality. It was of course, up to a point, part of the central tradition, but it was essentially at variance with the main current from Judaism through to Aquinas, in which God's immanence was balanced with his transcendence – His action from a point utterly outside man's world. In a certain light it led to a remarkably Sartrean emphasis on man as self-created, as in the classic utterance by Pico on "The Dignity of Man."

They were fond, too, of blending all religions and tolerating all cults, looking for confirmation of Christian doctrine in other religions and purging Christianity itself of elements peculiar to it. Michael Servetus, the Spaniard concerned for the conversion of Moslems and Jews, when he discovered that Scripture did not contain the word Trinity or the traditional formula of substance and persons, jettisoned the whole doctrine for the sake of unity. He was burnt for his pains, in 1553, in Calvin's Geneva.

Simplification of Christianity – carried on in reaction against a sterile, non-biblical theology – often had similar results. The non-dogmatic piety of the Brethren of the Common Life exemplifies this trend, as does that of their pupil, Erasmus, who characteristically followed Gerson and invoked the penitent thief as his patron, since he was saved with so little theology. Implicit in this often very salutary corrective to the nominalistic theology of the Schools was a marked tendency to reduce Christian doctrine to a kind of ethical creed, a blend of Stoicism and the Sermon on the Mount. This trend

was most serious when it was combined with a separation of Christianity from its historical core through the allegorical imposition of universal religious meanings. Boccaccio's story of the three identical rings bequeathed by a father to three sons, each of whom believed his own to be unique, is the classic illustration. At the father's death, the three proved to be indistinguishable; they were, of course, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The story found its great modern exposition, suitably enough, in the age of romantic religious sentimentality and humanitarianism, in Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*.

Humanism was not, then, an attack on orthodox Christianity. To the extent that it was subversive, it was subversive mainly by a subtle transmutation of values, through syncretism, allegorization, moralizing, the reduction of dogma and the spiritualizing of externals. C. S. Lewis, in a wholly characteristic passage, comments, "In their readiness to accept from whatever source all that seemed to them elevated, or spiritual, or even exciting, we sometimes seem to catch the first faint suggestion of what came, centuries later, to be called, 'higher thought'."³

If we agree, then, that the Church was seriously out of touch with the true spiritual demands of the society developing in fourteenth and fifteenth century Europe, and that this developing society took its character largely from a newly literate urban laity, we should add that their discontents provide the best clue to their unsatisfied aspirations. Without attempting to substantiate this in detail, I think we find that there were two predominant areas of concern. The first of these is the demand for a greater interiority of religion. The multiplication of extra-liturgical devotions, the demand for prayer manuals, scripture, and works of interior piety all point to this. This demand represented, of course, an overwhelming reaction to the heavily legalistic practices presented to them in the name of official Christianity. Indeed, most of the leading characteristics of Protestantism were already evident in the fifteenth century Church: decentralization, the preoccupation with personal salvation associated with devotion to the sufferings of Christ, and the neglect of the sacramental order as such, especially the Eucharist. At the same time, there was a diminishing concern with the Church as institution and with dogma, in favour of this personal devotion. It all came to a focus upon one momentous issue, the intense anxiety over justification: how is man reconciled with God? Frustrated by the elusive satisfactions of good works, more and more took refuge in mysticism, interior devotion, and non-sacramental piety.

³ *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954, p. 11.

Secondly, we detect alongside of this subjective, individualistic strain, a demand for a new understanding of Christian devotion in terms of life on this earth – the great desire, expressed also in the growth of civic humanism, for activity on behalf of family and community. The failure of Pius II's crusade was marvellously symbolic, since the crusades had been the great achievement of – and evidence for – the earlier success of the Church in capturing the imagination of men in a common ideal.

The fundamental question then, is that of the Church's failure to respond. It was not that consciences were asleep, or that ability was lacking. There were local responses of many varieties. There was the personal rigorism of Savonarola; there was the mysticism of Gerson, St. Briget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Dame Julian of Norwich and the whole roster of late mediaeval saints. There was the practical pietism of the *Devotio moderna*, biblical and strongly lay oriented. There was, of course, the tradition of Conciliarism, which at least in its early phases was closely allied with the desire to reform the Church in head and members. Each of these gained some harvest, like the Dominican revival around Catherine of Siena, or the Windesheim movement which spread from the Brethren of the Common Life throughout the Benedictine communities of Northern Europe. But each, too, was terribly limited in scope, in face of the great task to be done – the need to stir the entire Church to a fresh assertion of the values of the Kingdom of Christ; the need for a sense that a fresh start was truly possible. So the critical problem of the Reformation, to my way of thinking, is a problem which I will label, "immobilism"

There was no mystery about what was wrong with the spirit of the Church, and no pressing need for new legislation. Much would have been achieved if existing legislation could only have been made to work. If that could have been accomplished, it is conceivable that a greater integrity of life would have led to a further measure of needed change, a totally new orientation of spirituality and evangelism, to embrace the emerging world of urban enterprise. It is a striking feature of almost all late mediaeval reform proposals that they think only in terms of a restoration of the old standards of true practice. Even Nicholas of Cusa, with the most original mind of the age, thought in terms of the restoration of the "image" – a Platonic approach, which of course harmonized with Pauline and Patristic doctrine.⁴ In lesser men, we meet a totally clerical outlook: let there be no simony or pluralism; keep the monks in their cloisters and enforce true poverty; let the bishops everywhere see that the canons are enforced. There were two fatal shortcomings to such approaches. They were unattainable, as we have seen;

⁴ See for example, his *De pace fidei*, edited with commentary by R. Klibansky and H. Bascour, London, The Warburg Institute, 1956.

and they did not meet the temper of the times, by recognizing the aspirations of the new laity.

Why did not the Church respond? Why was it incapable of gathering together the innumerable streams of reform sentiment into a current which could sweep away the encrustations which imprisoned her? This very large problem might be discussed at a number of levels; perhaps the Great Schism was the most glaring evidence of inherent weakness in the governing apparatus of the Church itself, even apart from the tensions and ruptures inflicted by its entanglements with secular authority. But the general answer lies, I think, in an understanding of the liabilities which the Church carried from her historical involvement with the growth of feudal monarchy, and by that I mean not only her involvement with kings and bureaucracies, but with the whole system of tenure of land and offices. The answer lies, in a word, in a concept with which we began – the disunity of Christendom.

Gregory VII and his successors had astonishing success in centralizing the Church around the Roman curia; they rescued it from partition between ambitious lords and princes. But the mediaeval Church was not even remotely a monolithic unity. The writ of Rome ran everywhere in matters of doctrine, true; but in any other matter, financial, administrative or disciplinary, it had to penetrate a host of barriers. The same was true, *mutatis mutandis*, for archbishops and even bishops. By the fifteenth century, in fact, the whole ecclesiastical system was a pattern of ineffective authority, riddled with privileged enclaves. To pursue this properly, would make an already lengthy theme impossibly long, but perhaps we can be excused with one example. The kingdom of France, with ninety-three bishoprics and fourteen archbishoprics, had no metropolitan see. The primacy was contested between Lyons, the oldest see of Gaul, Rheims, whose archbishop was traditionally a *legatus natus*, and Paris, representing the power of the Crown. Within the dioceses themselves, in France as elsewhere, the bishops' authority was frequently more theoretical than real. Many benefices formally in his gift were in fact disposed of by other interests. On the average, a French bishop controlled the patronage of not over half the benefices in his diocese. The rest were disposed of by such jealous and frequently influential entities as monasteries, cathedral chapters, and noble laymen. Beyond this, the number of exempt religious communities grew constantly, at the level of parish life, the mendicant friars were the most conspicuous and troublesome example. Add to these harassments the depredations of royal authority and the papal *plenitudo potestatis*, which together often disposed over the bishop's head of what few important livings he had left in his hands, and the picture of episcopal helplessness is complete.

So general a portrait needs, of course, much shading and qualification, but the point is clear; this was a far more important matter than corruption

itself. Alongside it, of course, was the all pervading legalism of the feudal Church, expressing itself both in moral doctrine and in its tuition in spirituality, and the miasma of fiscality, a potent inducement to inertia throughout the offices of the clerical ruling order. On the whole there was no mystery about what was wrong with the spirit of the Church. The great need was to mobilize the forces of reform.

The most ominous consequence of immobilism was that it threw the initiative for Church reform into the hands of secular authority. By the late fifteenth century, it was clear to any reformer of perception that the only hope for effective action lay in cooperation with the local prince. Thus there appeared one reforming device to meet with significant success: the political prelate, a figure so armed with delegated papal power and so supported by royal authority that nothing could stand in his way. To the mutual benefit of Crown and Church, he would cut through entrenched interests to dissolve decayed monasteries, re-order ecclesiastical jurisdiction, bring the influence and administration of the Church into some sort of harmony with the growing apparatus of secular government, and, in general, modernize, reform, prune and retrench. Such was Nicholas of Cusa, who, for a time at least, carried all before him in a great part of Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, instituting the decrees of the Council of Basle. Such was the greatest of them all, Cardinal Ximenes, the man who made Spain the leading haven of Erasmian reform principles. Such would Wolsey have been, if he had had the stature of Ximenes, Cusa, or even the Cardinal d'Amboise in France. But in general, outside of Spain, northern Italy, southern Germany and, to some extent, France, little had been achieved of permanent value before the storm broke.

Why did it break? It is a commonplace to say that Luther's revolt made impossible the gradual emergence of reform principles in the Church and, instead, produced a reaction which completely altered the direction this reform would take. Was it Luther? Many of his ideas had been put forward more than a century before, by Wycliffe, to generate no more than local enthusiasm in England and Bohemia. Luther was a greater man in personal genius, in radicalism, boldness and energy, and he confronted a Christian society even further advanced in disillusion and decay. There is evidence, however, that this decay was just beginning to recede before the spreading conviction that things must be set right. What turned the crisis of reform into revolution was the interplay of a host of other factors which may be symbolically (if inevitably, inaccurately) indicated in the coincidence of two events, one in the world of ideas, the other in the world of politics, and both associated with a famous name. The names are the names of Charles V and Erasmus.

In the course of every revolution there is a moment when a vital inner cord snaps, a moment of which you can say that after that time, there was no turning back. In political revolutions this moment is often fairly easy to

locate: it is most often the gesture which indicates a serious intention to reform – the convening of the Estates General or the calling together of the First Continental Congress. Is there any equivalent in the history of the Reformation? Not, I think, in the same sense; the Fifth Lateran Council proclaimed once more the old, futile standards of true observance, and was almost universally ignored by those most concerned with reform. But there is one political event whose momentous consequences were foreseeable even at the time. When Charles of Burgundy, heir to the greatest appanage of political authority the world had seen since the Caesars, was elected Holy Roman Emperor, it was predictable that France and the German princes would seize the first opportunity which offered itself to demolish as much of this awesome accumulation as they could manage to touch. And part of that opportunity was presented at the same hour by a brilliant and tormented monk with a mission to purify the Church.

Even more profound, however, was the movement associated with the name of Erasmus. He was not, of course, the originator of the movement which takes his name. Christian humanism had already emerged by 1510 as the most promising of the movements of reform – as the only one which grasped the need to extend the traditional boundaries of Christian enterprise. Why then, are we justified in using the name of Erasmus to describe it? Because after Erasmus there is a tremendous difference. The movement of Christian humanism sweeps across national boundaries and takes on an irresistible evangelical impetus. This was already evident in men like Wimpfeling, Colet, Lefèvre d'Étaples and Contarini, but it was Erasmus who gave the movement its public character. He was its prophet and most prolific propagandist, and – preeminently – its scholar-hero. He fused the various components of reform into a positive creed and programme for a new Christian culture, a culture which would entirely embrace the values and aspirations of the classically-nourished urban middle classes and direct them to Christian ends. Into the creed entered the pietism of the *Devotio moderna*, the new scripture scholarship of Valla, the neo-Platonism of Florence, and the laicism of those who thirsted for a theology the layman could understand, which would provide the key to a recognized lay vocation within the Christian Church. What is more, Erasmus contributed more than any other humanist to the discrediting of the status quo by his probing and restless gift of satire. Finally, he had access everywhere to the centres of power and influential opinion: he alone had a truly European constituency. He formed the conscience of a whole generation, a generation of men and women determined that they had had enough of things as they were. He did what no movement or institution had been able to do before him – he forged the various local and individual impulses to reform into an international crusade under a common creed, and through his monumental endeavours to restore the Scriptures and the Fathers he provided his adherents with a sense that a fresh start was,

indeed, possible. This programme did embrace the new temper of the times, seeing the need for fresh enterprises rather than the reassertion of old disciplinary ideals, and in that sense it was truly, "*évangélisme*," the title by which – but for modern associations – it might more properly be known.

The creed of Erasmus and his co-workers was the *philosophia Christi* – the Christian culture of the educated layman, steeped in the message of the Gospels and liberated from the speculations of the Schools which were the exclusive monopoly of clerical initiates, and which polluted the pure strain of Christian tradition with the profane categories of Aristotelian rationalism. The phrase *philosophia Christi* itself describes the ideal – a life infused in thought, sentiment and behaviour with the Gospel of Christ, a life of conversion and interior commitment. The “inner religion is constantly urged as the true way to salvation, opposed to ‘Judaism’” – the confusion of fidelity to Christ with fidelity to external observance. The emphasis is not upon mystical union, but on practical, daily piety, nourished by the reading of Scripture and prayer. In that satirical attack which was the cutting edge of the *philosophie Christi*, the target was legalism and merely formal religious observance. It is hard to deny that this was the characteristic failing of daily religion in Erasmus’ day. The multiplication of devotions and pilgrimages, the founding of chantries, of vicariates and prebends, the payments for special prayers, the indulgences – all, like the liturgy, incomprehensible or exasperating to the layman – all witnessed to a state of affairs in which salvation, by and large, had become an administrative jurisdiction of the Church.

The genius of Erasmus was to see through the mass of abuses and corruptions to this fundamental problem; to see that no amount of discipline which merely restored true “observance” – the bye-word of all officially sponsored reform proposals – could restore the integrity and hence the authority of Christian worship without an additional dismantling of this tottering feudal, legalistic superstructure, with its firm clerical underpinnings, in favour of the humanistic culture of the bourgeois layman. Finally, the content of the faith itself was to be carefully scrutinized until the essential elements were discerned, the elements which were found in the Gospels and the early Creeds, so that the pure light of evangelical doctrine would leap forth undimmed from the tangle of definitions, opinions and speculative refinements which was the melancholy legacy of theological Aristotelianism and an over-active *magisterium*. In the traditional scholastic sense, the *philosophia Christi* was untheological. It rejected the notion of theology as a science (as did Luther) in favour of the more Patristic view that it should be an eloquent persuasion to piety and virtue. Its purpose was not to speculate; it was to improve the lives of men. Unquestionably its strength lay in its elevation of the layman’s vocation, which was seen as the potential source of new life in

a Church and society fallen into decay.

The new Gospel at once found its enemies. Indeed, it sought them out. We have referred already to its cutting edge, the brilliant satire of the Colloquies, and preeminently, of the paradoxical *Praise of Folly*. Often, Erasmus touched on themes like justification by faith which, once Luther had appeared, sounded like heresy. “Monasticism is not piety.” “Christ is the whole head of the Church.” “Once Luther had appeared ...” that is the sad keynote. The theology of Erasmus, undogmatic, practical, accommodating, sceptical of the high refinements which had engrossed the mediaeval Schools, had to suffer the fate of all middle positions once the lines of battle had been drawn. It was crushed between advances from both sides. His greatest weakness, in the end, was his presupposition of Catholic orthodoxy as a common ground of debate.

There were other weaknesses, too. The Christian humanists were altogether unsystematic. They overestimated the role of education, and they were far less well informed than they thought they were about the primitive sources of faith which they recommended so fervently.⁵ Like all humanists, they were essentially elitist, fearing popular movements and totally dependent upon the support of princes. More important, once their orthodoxy was questioned, was their philistine attitude to the established theology. However inadequate or inappropriate they felt it to be, by disdaining any communion with those who espoused it they cut themselves off from the living tradition of theological discourse, and when the crunch came, they were disastrously vulnerable. But none of these weaknesses need perhaps have been fatal if it had not been for the breakdown of the European order in a prolonged conflict over Hapsburg power, and if it had not been for the appearance of radical heresy powerfully sponsored.

Erasmus knew it all. He wrote in 1521, “... to speak frankly, if I had

⁵ Despite the vast editorial efforts of the humanists, a good understanding of even the third century A.D. was not available until about 1530, and the principal works of the second century apologists were not known until the 1550's. As for the Apostolic Fathers, they were very little known. The Epistles of St. Ignatius appeared in Latin in 1498 but in texts much interpolated; the Epistle of Polycarp of Smyrna to the Philippians appeared in Latin in 1498, but not in Greek until 1633. A bad Latin text of the Shepherd of Hermas was published in 1513, but the first Greek text had to wait until 1866. The crucial *Didache*, whose exact dating is still the subject of much dispute, appeared in 1883. Much of the violent battle about the primitive Church in the early sixteenth century was thus in serious obscurity. This was a material point for a reform tradition like that of the humanists, whose strongest arguments were founded on the appeal to the sources of doctrine and faith.

foreseen that an age such as this would arise, either I would not have written certain things which I did write, or I would have written them in a different way ... No name is more hateful to me than that of conspiracy or schism or faction.” His final repudiation of Luther ... was bitter indeed. At first he had been sympathetic, but from the first he pleaded for moderation and open discussion of the issues on both sides. Soon Luther found him pusillanimous; Erasmus found Luther impossible. Worst, Luther’s violence endangered the future of his own programme for reform: “If it is right to hate anyone because of personal offenses, the Lutherans have injured no one more than me.”⁶ On Luther he urged confidence in the clement Leo XI and the “mild and placable” Emperor; the decisions of those by whose will human affairs are governed must, he thought, be left to the Lord. “If they prescribe what is right, it is proper to obey; but if what is unjust, it is a holy act to bear it lest anything worse happen.” It was all in vain; the Lutherans publicly accused him of cowardice and rushed to their warfare against Rome. In April 1526 Erasmus wrote his final word to Luther. It concluded thus:

It does not matter what happens to us two, least of all to myself who must shortly go hence, even if the whole world were applauding us: it is *this* that distresses me, and all the best spirits with me, that with the arrogant, impudent, seditious temperament of yours you are shattering the whole globe in ruinous discord, exposing good men and lovers of good learning to certain frenzied Pharisees, arming for revolt the wicked and revolutionary, and in short, so carrying on the cause of the Gospel as to throw all things sacred and profane into chaos; as if you were eager to prevent this storm from turning at last to a happy issue. I have ever striven towards such an opportunity. What you owe me, and in what coin you have repaid me - I do not go into that. All that is a private matter; it is the public disaster which distresses me, and the irremediable confusion of everything, for which we have to thank only your uncontrolled nature, that will not be guided by the wise counsel of friends, but easily turns to any excess at the prompting of certain inconstant swindlers. I know not whom you have saved from the powers of darkness; but you should have drawn the sword of your pen against those ungrateful wretches and not against a temperate disputation. I would have wished you a better mind, were you not so delighted with your own. Wish me what you will, only not your mind, unless God has

⁶ Erasmus to Jodocus Jonas, 10 May 1521. The Latin text is in P. S. Allen (ed.), *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, IV, no. 1202. The citation is from the English translation by John C. Olin, in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, Harper Torchbooks, 1965, p. 160.

changed it for you.⁷

In the diary of Albrecht Durer there is a touching entry at the moment when he heard, in 1521, that Luther had been imprisoned:

I do not know whether he is still alive or was murdered ... O all ye pious Christians, join with me in heartfelt mourning for this man, inspired by God. Pray God that another may be sent in his place, as enlightened as he. O Erasmus of Rotterdam ... see how the filthy tyranny of worldly might and the powers of darkness prevail! Hearken, knight of Christ, ride at the Lord's side, defend the truth and grasp the martyr's crown!⁸

Poor Durer had the wrong man. Even if Erasmus had identified his cause with that of Luther, he did not aspire to the crown of martyrdom. Dürer's knight of Christ was the same who, when asked what he would do if the Lutherans offered him the choice of accepting their creed or death, replied, "I would imitate St. Peter, and renounce my faith."

II

The failure of Erasmus, it has been said, was Europe's tragedy. Certainly in the history of the Church, it is the crucial link between his time and our own. With the élite of Europe captive to his pen, the forces of spiritual regeneration united in a common programme and the progress of learning accelerating with every year, why did Erasmus fail? He failed before the extinction of European peace, and the appearance of militant heresy. The latter frightened the leaders of the Church away from their discipleship to Erasmus, the former guaranteed powerful political support for any movement which could be deflected against the first great threat to the balance of power among the new nation states. While the Lutheran movement grew, nurtured by the fervour of men freed from the tyranny of spiritual legalism and protected by German princelings terrified at the spectacle of a Hapsburg powerful enough to realize at last the dream of a united Germany, the enemies of Erasmus

⁷ Allen, *Opus Epistolarum* VI, no. 1688; translation of Barbara Flower in Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of the Reformation*, Harper Torchbooks, 1957, pp. 241-242.

⁸ Quoted by Huizinga, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

strove to identify his cause with Luther's own. "*Erasmus posuit ova, Lutherus eduxit pullos* – God grant that we may smash the eggs and stifle the chicks." The misleading view that Erasmus fathered Lutheranism started with his monkish detractors and was eventually perpetuated by Protestant scholars anxious to claim his scholarly prestige for the common cause against Rome. But despite its shortcomings (and they have bedevilled Reformation scholarship for generations) this thesis contains an important truth; the work of humanistic evangelism, by satirizing abuses, questioning the traditional authority of scholastic theology and Roman curia alike, probing difficult and embarrassing questions and proclaiming everywhere the gospel message of lay devotion, constituted an important achievement of pre-evangelism. In the ground they had prepared were sown the seeds of a doctrine which many of his disciples found ultimately as repugnant as did Erasmus himself.⁹ Yet they were hard pressed to preserve their own cause against an increasingly militant reaction. After Charles V had been chastened by the Sack of Rome and the growth of internal dissension in the Empire, Erasmus lost the support of his most influential protector. In Paris, Louis de Berquin, the French translator of Erasmus, Hutten and Luther, was burned at the stake. Erasmus's writings were condemned by the theological faculties of the Sorbonne and Louvain. In Spain, the Inquisition, at one time the most effective protector of his disciples, began its melancholy purge. Yet in the last year of his life, a new "Erasmist" Pope, Paul III, offered him a cardinal's hat, a symbol of the underground persistence of his ideas even in a frightened Church.¹⁰

His party, under enormous pressure, evacuated its middle position. Some disciples chose Rome – the advocates of an Erasmian Catholicism represented in the highest councils by the reforming cardinals, Contarini, Sadoleto, Morone and Pole. Others, despairing of Roman policy, chose Protestantism – an Erasmian Protestantism – Melancthon, Bucer, the Spaniard Encinas. In one instance the Erasmian creed found a home in a major established church of the reform, in England. Otherwise its influence was mostly underground or indirect, or exerted outside the fold of Christian congregations in the new vein of sceptical humanism announced by Montaigne.

Certain conclusions now emerge. If our reading of the matter is correct, the central issue was not corruption, but the collision between an immobile, hierarchic ecclesiastical structure and the aspirations of a reform movement

⁹ See K. H. Oelrich, *Der späte Erasmus und die Reformation. Reformationsgeschichtliche Studien und Texte*, 86. Münster, Aschendorff, 1961. Also, Andreas Flitner, *Erasmus im Urteil seiner Nachwelt*, Tübingen, M. Niemeyer, 1952.

¹⁰ See *Opus Epistolarum* I, p. 65, XI, pp. 221, 244 f. The evidence is not entirely clear.

which was backed by a newly-literate laity. This lay group was intensely conscious of a new providential role in the development of society, a role which was, as yet, unrecognized by the established traditions of the Church. It had provided itself with an authentic culture that was strongly secular in tone, although it was capable of drawing, also, on deep Christian roots. It was conscious of new power, economic and political – the new monarchs were after all among the newly literate laymen of the day – and as events proved, it did in fact have the influence to reshape ecclesiastical structures to suit its purposes. It is not true that there was no promise of reform; indeed, there is every evidence that a new texture of Christian thought was beginning to appear, woven from the threads of mediaeval piety, from a new appreciation of the sources of Christian tradition, and from the various creeds of classical origin which appealed to the urban intelligentsia. Ponderous as was the superstructure of feudal responsibility which the Church had inherited, there is reason to think that in time this ferment could have penetrated even the immobility of the late mediaeval Church and brought about a revitalization of the entire Christian body. What its true promise was, we shall never know. The momentous accident of Luther's appearance in the context of the greatest international crisis between the death of Charlemagne and 1789 provoked armed revolt and a warfare of rival orthodoxies supported at sword point. It was not a happy environment for the dispassionate discovery of dogmatic truth.

Instead, the promise of the pre-reform movement was blighted in the mutual intolerance of unilateral orthodoxies, and an apparently impassable gulf was established especially between the Catholic Church and the reformed churches of the Protestant tradition. The real gains were for the forces of secularism: the new monarchies, whose jealousy of power had contributed so heavily to the problems of the late mediaeval Church, made good their most ambitious dreams of dominance over power ecclesiastical in the Protestant establishments; they did almost as well with Rome, through the concordat system. Moreover, the narrowly conceived traditions of rival orthodoxies were too rigid to accommodate the expansive power of the new intellectual currents, especially those with a technological and scientific bent. The divorce of religious and secular culture, the characteristic note of modern European intellectual life, had begun.

What of Rome itself? Was its reactions to the Reformation simply one of retrenchment and failure to grow? It is another commonplace that the reaction to Protestant doctrine was simply to trumpet more loudly the traditional Catholic view. In fact, this is much less true of the Decrees of Trent, which were in fact a conservative compromise, than of the effective interpretation they were often given by later generations. The greatest success, as might be expected in a Church so preponderantly clerical, was with

ecclesiastical discipline: that the standards of clerical integrity have been maintained with remarkable fortitude ever since is a point which Protestant leaders at the present are very willing to concede. The laity fared less well, since much of the achievement in discipline was attained through tightened clerical control. The demand for a modern education in tune with the needs of the day was met, for a time at least, and it was met for a century by the Jesuits with a success which compelled the admiration of the whole of Europe. On the side of spirituality, in place of a lay devotional literature as such, lay piety was assimilated to clerical patterns, and it was closely associated with clerical supervision – the age of the sodality, of spiritual direction and of retreats had been born. The clergy retained their monopoly of technical theology divorced from the new intellectual currents, and the laity were given, on the whole, a non-theological, pietistic devotional system, with an intense emphasis – reflecting late mediaeval interests – on a personal, introspective and individualistic non-liturgical spirituality.

Nevertheless, there was remarkable evidence of the nascent vitality of the Roman Church, perhaps partly because her theology was inherently much more in tune than were the rival systems with the values of an age which loved the order of creation. If the love of Catholic humanists for the native achievements of the human spirit was to some extent muffled in the new air of stern and puritanical pietism which settled over post-Tridentine Rome, it flourished uninhibited and free in the exuberant artistic propaganda of the baroque age. Moreover, catechesis was developed after Protestant models, clerical negligence heavily punished, the lines of communication between Rome and the bishops were cleared as much as concordats would allow, and the bishops in turn were allowed more truly to govern their dioceses. The result was remarkable reassertion of Catholic vitality, expressed by a vigorous missionary enterprise all along the new frontiers of European technology, and by the domestic revival of a fervent spirituality, a spirituality at once mystical and practical, and buoyant – buoyant enough to refloat the barque of Peter, complete with new gunports, and thick slabs of clerical armour-plating bolted to the upper decks.

There is no time here to discuss the details of the achievement and limitations of the Catholic Reform. Instead, it may be characterized well by a phrase of Yves Congar: its achievement was to overcome the perennial temptation of the Church to Pharisaism – to making the means of salvation ends in themselves.¹¹ This is not to say that this tendency has not persisted,

¹¹ The phrases, “temptation of Pharisaism” and “temptation to act like the Synagogue” are employed in his *Vraie et Fausse Réforme dans l’Eglise*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1950, Para I, chapter 2, II and III, but with a broader and more systematic purpose.

but that by and large, the simple fact that the true object of the Church's mission is the elevation of man to share in the Divine life has always been much more evident since the Council of Trent. To that extent at least, it responded to the essential critique of the Erasmian reformers. The limitation of the Catholic Reform was its decision to become a Synagogue – to become, within the European scene, a self-sufficient, enclosed entity, effectively, a sect. In place of concentration on essentials of the faith, there was concentration on the distinguishing marks of Catholicism; in place of a renewal of theology, there was a growing process of alienation from the evolution of western thought. Sociologically, the process was marked by a growing identification of the Church with the interests of ruling houses and fading aristocracies on the one hand, and of the peasantry on the other – an ironic process of “feudalizing” after the day of feudalism had passed, and along with it the day of the Church's true social universality. I should be noted that there was one exception, in time to be of momentous importance – the remote colonization of a Catholic population in North America.

As generations passed it became more and more evident that the temptation to the Synagogue was a costly temptation indeed. Embattled, alien, proud and suspect, the Church could maintain its isolation only at the cost of periodic scandal (the Galileo episode remains the classic issue), of iron discipline and of recurrent purges. Thus Lord Acton, perhaps the most learned Catholic of his generation, could write in the *Home and Foreign Review* of April, 1864, eight months before the promulgation of *Quanta cura* and the *Syllabus of Errors*, as follows:

Among the causes which have brought dishonour on the Church in recent years, none have had more fatal operation than those conflicts with science and literature which have led men to dispute the competence, or the justice, or the wisdom, of her authorities ... They have induced a suspicion that the Church, in her zeal for the prevention of error, represses that intellectual freedom which is essential to the progress of truth; that she allows an administrative interference with convictions to which she cannot attach the stigma of falsehood; and that she claims a right to restrain the growth of knowledge, to justify an acquiescence in ignorance, to promote error, and even to alter at her arbitrary will the dogmas that are proposed to faith.¹²

¹² The famous essay, entitled “Conflicts with Rome,” is printed in *Essays on Freedom and Power*, Meridian Books, New York, 1955, and in various other collections of Acton's writings.

This costly decision by the post-Reformation Church to reform by discipline linked to disengagement has led us once more to a situation where there is deep concern that the institutional Church is radically out of touch with the demands of Christian society. There is an ironic measure both of the achievement and of the shortcomings of the Catholic reform in the fact that, while in the fifteenth century the reformers are united in demanding a de-secularization of a much too worldly Church, the contemporary cry is for the Church to be reborn in the secular city.

We find, too, many parallel symptoms between the crisis of the Reformation and the tensions today. There is once more a sense of anxiety from a fragmenting of the Church's authority: Pope Paul might echo the complaint of Pius II that there is "no head whom all will obey." There is the same awareness of new social and political forces which threaten the integrity of Catholic culture. There is once more a tendency to mute the Incarnational aspect of Christianity in favour of a humanistic Christ, accompanied by a doctrine of ethical Christianity mounted through a social gospel. There is syncretism, evident in the desire to mute the peculiar doctrines of Christianity in favour of the enlightened conscience of non-believers. There is a marked philistinism towards traditional technical theology combined with a flight into a kind of para-theology based on philosophical currents alien to the central tradition of the Church – most of them now post-Hegelian. Once more there is a marked return *ad fontes*, to Scripture and the Fathers, characteristic of all ages of reform. And once more this is linked with insistence on bringing this knowledge to the layman, and on the circulation of informed opinion about Scripture which is accessible to everyone. Once more there is insistence on vernacular liturgy, and on worship which reflects the demands of the local community. With all of this there is a realization of the Erasmian dream of a popular circulation of theological works which would delight the heart of the retiring and acerbic Dutchman. Once again there is a strong reaction against a legalistic moral system of prescriptions, pains and penalties and against extra-liturgical devotion, in favour of piety centered on the person of Christ and in favour of sanctification through charitable works – the active apostolate.

Is there anything to parallel the anxiety over justification? It is possible that there is, and it is at quite a deep level. It seems evident that there is a current of opinion running against the entire sacramental system in favour of something like justification by faith. It is usually not far removed from the gospel of "love" understood primarily as an answer to human isolation. This is, I suspect, closely tied to another interesting parallel. The justification controversy of the sixteenth century grew, in part, from the "retreat of God" which came about largely through nominalistic theology. In an attempt to rescue God's omnipotence and dignity it had in many ways succeeded in making Him utterly remote, capricious and inscrutable. The anxiety over

justification in the sixteenth century was a knot formed from this sense of the terrible remoteness of God, from legalistic devotions and from an equally legalistic moral theology in the confessionals. In the background to the present controversy those latter elements are still often present; the first – the remoteness of God – has been reborn as the “death of God” – the feeling that the God of traditional theology is so remote from the concepts and values of contemporary thought as to be entirely meaningless. As a result the present anxiety over justification is not seen so much as a problem of relating man to God, as of relating man to his fellow man. In the last several months it has become clear that the initial success of the liturgical reform and the theological revival grounded upon the notion of salvation history has not concealed a fundamental debate on the very meaning of salvation. It is possible to predict that we are very soon to hear much more about the Modernist crisis, the Banquo’s ghost at many a liberal theological *agape*.

What do these parallels mean? How do we read the symptoms? It is clear, I think, that the Church is once again undergoing the shock of reappraisal induced by an awareness that her established procedures, structures and pastoral attitudes contrast sharply with the actual state and outlook of society. One consequence is the renewed search for essentials, closely parallel to the Erasmian quest for the essentials of the faith. To this I will return in a moment. Many of the parallels are the predictable accompaniment of any period of intense doctrinal debate, and many, like the elitist tendencies of coterie theologies, have no profound implication for the life of the Church at large. But some of the parallels we have noticed occur because of an additional factor. One of the major elements in the Reformation crisis looms just as large today – the demands of a laity, profoundly sympathetic with secular values, educated, resentful of the ancient clerical monopoly of theological learning, and united, informed and misled by a revolution in communications at least as profound as that of printing. We find among them, too, an ideal of state service and social concern, and we find it markedly in North America where a Catholic middle class not only survived but flourished and prospered under the paternal rule of a disciplined and highly regulative clerical Church. It is not difficult to explain why it is on this continent that the post-Vatican II atmosphere most closely parallels developments of the early sixteenth century.¹³

¹³ It is interesting to consider the contrast in leadership of opinion between Europe and America since Vatican II. In Europe the most radical thought comes from clerical voices, while distinguished lay opinion, which held conspicuous authority between the wars, tends now to show concern for traditional values. In America the most radical voices are those of laymen (including former priests and religious).

If we are struck by parallels, however, we must also note important differences. The first is the freedom of the modern Church from the synthetic feudal alliance of the seventeenth century. The involvement with dynasties and aristocracies was forcibly stripped away by the time of Vatican I. It is no accident that it was immediately after the loss of temporal power that the modern Church showed the first signs of willingness to move forward. Significantly, it was in the realm of social policy, under Leo XIII. Today, the political involvement of the Church is so local as scarcely to matter in the struggle over renewal. It does not matter that this freedom has been by and large forced upon the Church rather than sought. For the same reason, the modern movement for reform lacks the highly inflammable material of widespread decadence and corruption. Modern Catholicism continues to err through legalism, but the marks for integrity in general are very good.

And this point is immediately related to the most striking difference of all: the difficulty in attempting to compare the present situation of the Church to its trial of "immobilism" in the sixteenth century. The Second Vatican Council is the realization, four hundred years after the day, of the great dream of the pre-reform party: a Council directed not simply to the reassertion of old standards of observance, but precisely to an awakening of the conscience of the Church at every level. The importance of this is even clearer if you attempt to find a modern equivalent of Erasmus's *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, the manifesto and handbook of the Christian humanist party. There are many distinguished candidates, but the real discovery of this exercise is that no one work had the impact and widespread significance in moulding the outlook of the reforming generation that Erasmus's writing had. There is only one body of material which has the universal impact of the *Enchiridion*, and that is the collection of Council decrees. It is a remarkable fact that, like the *Enchiridion* itself, they too are predominantly hortatory and normative, not doctrinal. In a profound sense they are prophetic, in that they interpret the present condition of the people of God in the light of their eternal destiny.

There is, then, no crisis of immobilism in the earlier sense. There is, however, a kind of immobilism difficult to distinguish, at times, from apathy or despair, a reluctance to change when the direction of change is so uncertain. This may produce a resort to the narcotic of nostalgia: Vatican II was a mistake. It may, on the other hand, produce a drift into indifference or hostility: The Gospel is "irrelevant." What many Catholics are waiting for, no doubt, is a fresh Christian vision of our situation which goes beyond the achievement of Vatican II; this, quite clearly, is the attraction exerted by a Teilhard de Chardin.

The new directions eventually found will emerge, no doubt, from a complicated procedure now under way, the fresh quest for essentials. We have seen that this was one of the standards carried by the Erasmian reformers: it

is also the unarticulated platform of many contemporary theologians. The highly sensitive issue of the development of doctrine is in fact precisely this question. If it is true that in the sixteenth century the sudden fresh contact with classical culture helped the Christian humanists to discern what was worth preserving from the mediaeval heritage, the problem today is surely that there is no simple single corpus of learning which can act in quite the same way.

There are two procedures under way, however, which are promising to perform this function. The first of these is the recurrent resort of the Church to renewed study of Scripture and the early Fathers. About this little need be said. But there is another process under way which is closely related to this, although it is more characteristic of the modern mentality, and that is the renewed concern with Church history. Given that the Church of faith and the Church of history are one reality, in the history of the Church we may learn a great deal to distinguish between those elements in her life which are of the essence and those which are of transitory importance.

This is particularly evident when we turn to consider one of the structural changes brought about by Vatican II, a change which is an essential complement to the procedures of self-examination presently under way, and that is the concept of collegiality. Hubert Jedin has recently written that an ecclesiology which is not nourished by church history is like a frame without a picture.¹⁴ In the constitution *De Ecclesia*, the relation of the episcopal college to its head, the Pope, is called *communio*. It is impossible to understand the content of this notion without knowing how and in what forms *communio* was experienced in the ancient Church; that, for example, which Irenaeus wanted to indicate by saying that Pope Anicetus and Polycarp “communicated together”: it was not only a question of communication in the true faith, but also of the Eucharistic community, of remembrance in the dyptics, and of the incessant correspondence of the individual churches among themselves and with the Bishop of Rome. The introduction of episcopal conferences will appear alarming only to those who know nothing about the synodal structure of the ancient Church, and who do not know that the fiscal centralization at the end of the Middle Ages and the liturgical and administrative centralization after the Council of Trent were forms “conditioned and justified by the era, but not the only possible form of the exercise of papal primacy.” The powers assigned to the episcopal conferences are not a break with the tradition of the past; they are a restoration of a collaboration which once existed between the popes and the bishops, between

¹⁴ “La position de l'histoire de l'Eglise dans l'enseignement théologique,” *Seminarium*, XIX (January-March, 1967) 130-46. The remarks which follow draw from Jedin's text.

the Roman Church and the particular churches for the good of the Universal Church, and this restoration corresponds to the need of the world-wide Church of the twentieth century. Four centuries ago Melchior Cano, the founder of theological methodology, said: "*Viri omnes docti consentiunt rudes omnino theologos illos esse, in quorum lucubrationibus historia muta est.*" It is probably true to say that it was necessary to wait for the one-world of modern technology before the Roman communion, with its vast, international community, could experience something like collegiality, something which up to this time has been the property only of provincial or more static and confined traditions: the Church of England or the Orthodox Church.

On the level of doctrine the great theme of this present age is, I think, a theme which links us most deeply to the crisis of the sixteenth century. It is the need to incorporate into Christian teaching the humane moral values which emerged in Renaissance Europe, which have been heightened in modern times by a growing sense of man's capacity for control of nature and for self-improvement. In his opening address to Vatican II, Pope John said,

There is a steadily growing conviction in the supreme value of the dignity of the human person, the importance of its progress to perfection, and of the necessary effort this involves.¹⁵

We have now come some way from the sixteenth century, and it seems very likely that we do have the theological concepts which will allow us to deal with this problem.¹⁶ They lie in the theme of "graced nature," nature which is already redeemed, the only nature which we actually know. This allows us to hold that by adhering to the norms of nature with reason and integrity, a man can indeed transcend himself, even apart from an explicit belief in God, provided that such lack of belief is not culpable. This is the theme which I think unites the various enterprises of such different but profoundly influential figures as Teilhard de Chardin, Blondel and Rahner. Their common concern, like that of Erasmus and More and their companions, is to insist that man's spiritual perfectibility is a capacity interior to his nature as redeemed, not a matter of conformity to standards extrinsic, alien and

¹⁵ Most conveniently available (with a slightly different rendering of the original text) in Council Daybook. *Vatican II*, sessions 1 and 2, edited by Floyd Anderson, published by National Catholic Welfare Conference, Washington, D.C., 1965, p. 28.

¹⁶ See e.g., A. Levi, S.J., "Renaissance and Reformation," *The Dublin Review*, No. 505 (Autumn, 1965), 255-267

remote. It is at least in its orthodox formulation – the great vision of St. Paul, of a whole creation groaning for redemption, a creation in which man has the preeminent role, and in which he is entirely at home, playing his part in the *mysterion* – the hidden plan of God for the redemption of the cosmos. With the humanists they reject the late scholastic view that the perfection of man is extrinsic to his personal moral development, and they reject also the solution of Luther, that the perfection of man is due to the grace of God alone without any reference to man's own free will. In the end, the victory has gone to the humanists, insisting that the teachings of the great pagan moralists and the evangelical counsels form a continuum, and that both are part of the economy of grace and salvation. It is this delicate but profound theme which is today being resumed, and upon its development – rather than upon the superficial issues of contraception and clerical celibacy which captivate the popular press – that there rests the future of a valid *aggiornamento* of Christian teaching.

In summary, I would say that the forces released by Vatican II have been deeply disturbing precisely because the Council dealt accurately with the true problem of the modern Catholic Church – the failure of the Synagogue. That the impulse came from the top is the best evidence that the problem of immobility is radically different from that in the sixteenth century. It will remain to trouble local churches for a long time, but it seems safe to say that the process of ferment and change is guaranteed by the very forces which the new vision of the Church presupposes: the existence of an international community of Catholics, lay and clerical, instructed and informed, and involved in open debate at all levels of the Church. Does this mean that the Church will be defenseless against heterodoxy? Not at all. The long history of an exclusively centralized structure has robbed us of any understanding of the way in which the consensus of the Church can discern and expunge false doctrine. But to see the process in active operation, read the history of the Arian controversy, or study the struggle against Pelagianism.

This is as much as I can say on the basis of parallels with what has gone before; perhaps the real conclusion is that the present experience of the Church is as unprecedented as it is full of promise. In the past, such trials have always been a prelude to the emergence of unexpectedly vigorous new life. Considering the same precedents it seems certain that his new life will appear without being recognized at once. As Jean Guitton has recently written of the sixteenth century crisis, “Men are blind to the new beginnings of their own day. The new birth slips in quietly and surely, and takes hold in the substance of things.”¹⁷ But in this new birth we have no choice but to take

¹⁷ *Great Heresies and Church Councils* (New York and Evanston, 1965). p. 145.

part in all sobriety of mind. This point also was best put by Lord Acton with whom we can conclude:

From the beginning of the Church it has been a law of her nature that the truths which eventually proved themselves the legitimate products of her doctrine, have had to make their slow way upwards through a phalanx of hostile habits and traditions, and to be rescued, not only from open enemies, but also from friendly hands that were not worthy to defend them.