

I. Catholicism in the post-modern world

(9:30 – 10:30 Tuesday May 2, 2006)

The significance of Vatican II was that it forced into the open a re-imagining of Catholicism that was the fruit of many years of pastoral praxis and biblical, liturgical and theological investigation into the founts of our tradition that had been happening here and there, but that, prior to the Council, was easily missed and by-passed. In the Catholic world in which all of us grew up, Catholicism, in the Roman rite, was thought of as all-encompassing. We thought it provided a complete belief-system that answered all our questions. It set the direction for our lives. Fidelity to the 'faith of our fathers' was the basic commitment that would guide us through life to its goal. It gave us an ideal that we thought of as worth striving for. It provided a personal and social environment that was partly defined as not protestant, not orthodox, not non-Catholic. We were educated and encouraged to live our life within the institutional frameworks that were imagined as fixed and settled. Many of us learned to love well within this institution and our confidence in it was constantly strengthened by the valuable life-experiences that reinforced our confidence.

This security could not survive the diversity of life-experiences opened up by modern travel, by the information explosion, by awareness of the complexity of the world and the real values found outside the system within which we had grown up. The river we were in reached the sea, as did many other rivers. We saw the world from outer space as one globe. We came to know that people very different from us found meaning and a beautiful life in ways that were foreign to us. We wanted to discover what it was that they saw. If some of us preferred to put our head in the sand and pretend that nothing has changed, our children won't have it. Their search for meaning can't be locked into any system, however rich, however graced, and they don't respect us for opting for a vision that they see as narrow.

The Vatican Council, in its main thrust, faced the challenge. There were compromises and hesitations, but no one can read 'The Church in the Modern World' without sensing a graced opportunity to re-imagine Catholicism. The greatest tragedy facing Catholicism today is not those who are curious about and who want to explore the real values that they experience outside the system. It is the huge failure especially of Church leaders to dare the challenge of a new way of looking at our rich tradition and our mission. Our best hope lies in the large number of Catholics, including many Church leaders, who have embraced the modern world and dared to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus in it.

I will illustrate with two examples the dramatic change in perspective that was picked up by Vatican II and that challenged the Church from the highest level. The first is at the level of Christian ecumenism. Most of us missed the profound thinking that had gone on among scholars and pastors prior to the Council. We still thought of other Christians needing to repudiate the Reformation and return to the one, true Church (need I say it, the 'Roman Catholic Church'), which we embraced and defended as having kept intact the revelation given by Jesus and handed down faithfully over the centuries 'in spite of dungeon, fire and sword.' Then came the Decree on Ecumenism with the challenging title 'Unitatis Redintegratio'. We were being told that re-integration is needed because unity has been broken and everyone, including Catholics, has suffered loss. True, as Catholics, we have much to offer. Equally true, as Catholics we have lost much and have much to receive. Our energy must be to draw closer to Jesus, closer to the rich founts of our faith, and to welcome other Christians to journey with us so that together we can re-discover and 're-integrate', to everyone's benefit.

This is a very different attitude. It is also an attitude that is more humble, and, in the light of experience, more real. We had to learn it. To the next generation it is totally obvious. Nothing is lost by this change in perspective, except prejudice born of lack of information. Those who dare the journey of 'reintegration' are sometimes wrongly accused of embracing 'relativism'. The

Church is not saying that there is no objective truth and that it doesn't matter what you believe. It is not saying that everything is a matter of opinion. It is simply recognising, as Jesus said so clearly to Nicodemus, that 'the Spirit breathes where it wills' (John 3:8). It is saying that God's Spirit is alive wherever there is truth and love, and that truth and love are found (along with their opposites) in every culture, in every religion, in every people. We can enrich each other by sharing our values and our religious experience. We can also help each other recognise the error and the lack of love that is also found in every culture, in every religion, in every people. The Catholic Church is always in need of reform, as are all other institutions, and we can be helped in this by people in other Christian communities, in other religions, and by those who see themselves as atheists, some of whom identify themselves in this way, though they have rejected only the 'god' they have been exposed to – a false 'god', and one they did well to reject. Their lives often belie their 'atheism.'

The second illustration is a more fundamental one, and offers the setting for the first. It is the recognition that there really is only one God, and that, consequently, everything belongs to everything else, and fundamentally, everything is sacred in its own way. God is, in the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin 'the heart and the beyond of everything.' We should remember that not many were listening to Teilhard prior to the Council, and there were Church authorities who tried to silence him! That 'God' is indeed 'the heart and the beyond of everything' makes sense to the younger generation. A smaller 'god' makes no sense to them (thank God!). If we want to talk about 'salvation', they know that we have to consider the biosphere. Conformity to religious cult is interesting. It can be beautiful. It is not seen as essential. Religion as lived in the first part of last century was powerless to prevent two world wars. Religion today that is locked into one culture is experienced as destructive, wherever we look, be it the Middle East, Sudan, Northern Ireland, the USA or any other part of our world. Young people are not going to buy it, unless they opt to disengage from the world for reasons of apathy or insecurity.

The modern Church teaches that the one God in whom we believe – the God who is love – is mysteriously gracing every human being and drawing everyone into communion. For this to be real it must be happening where people are, from within their culture including their religious culture. Appended to this paper are two pages of references from the Vatican Council and subsequent papal statements that insist on this truth. This is a big shift in imagining Catholicism from that of our childhood and early education. The fact that God is calling everyone to Himself does not mean that everything within every culture is good. This is clearly not the case. Every culture needs constant purification, but we must work at removing the 'beam' from our own eye before we start attempting to remove the 'speck' out of other people's eyes! (Matthew 7:3-5). The fact that God is calling everyone to salvation, and from within their own lives, including their religious lives, need not inevitably lead to relativism. It does not mean that we, as Catholics, have nothing to say to our world, nothing to offer. On the contrary, there has perhaps never been a time when missionary work has been more important. Arguably there has never been a time when people's spiritual search has been more intense. What it does mean is that we have to connect with this search, and focus on sharing meaning. A security that fails to respect and engage people's profound longing is valueless, if not decidedly harmful.

The word 'Catholic' has never been more important. It means 'universal'. Today we are asked to realise that our Church will only be in fact Catholic when 'there is one flock and one shepherd'. In the meantime, our claim on the word is a claim that we will never be satisfied till everyone knows Jesus as the icon of God's choice in revealing in human terms what 'God' is really like, as well as what we, as human beings, could be. We welcome the witness of every human being and every people that responds to God's Spirit stirring in their hearts and lives. As 'Catholics' we state for all to hear that we are not one among many denominations. We are not defined by the

fences that people have built. We are a stream, flowing from the heart of Jesus, to slake the thirst of every person on the globe, and we offer them all that we have been given, keeping the door open and the fire in the hearth alight to welcome them to join us in promoting the Catholic dream of being all-embracing. It is this Catholic dream that is our greatest gift to the world, and it is a gift that makes total sense, especially to the young and uncommitted, provided that those claiming to be 'Catholic' have really embraced it. A smaller version of 'Catholic' is self-contradictory and repugnant. People are walking away from it or bypassing it in droves.

The world desperately needs a 'Catholic' vision. Christians need it, too. We need a community that takes the Incarnation seriously, that refuses to seek God by turning from the world, but that knows that at heart the world and everyone in it is sacred, that everything is a symbol of God – a fact demonstrated by a community that is sacramental and works to mediate the divine in every aspect of living. These are the values espoused (in theory) by the Catholic Church. We must live them more authentically and have the courage to name and oppose those forces that would seek to direct Catholicism into narrower channels.

This universal vision should not be new. We see it in the life of Jesus. Jesus loved Judaism. He loved Jerusalem and the Temple. He came to know God largely through them. The difference was that he went to the heart of Judaism and had the courage to challenge whatever in the practice of Judaism was an obstacle to its achieving its goal. His contemporaries accused him of violating the law and they had him crucified. Jesus saw himself as bringing the Law to its flowering, which is how those who were attracted to journey with Jesus also saw what he was doing. That the majority of Jews failed to go with Jesus to the heart of their faith and chose to stay within the security of their traditions led to a break from which we are still suffering. That some dared to embrace the 'Catholic' vision that engaged Jesus' zeal accounts for the growth and spread of Christianity, which, where it has been lived authentically, has been an enormous gift to the world.

We would do well to reflect on the life of Paul. He, too, was rejected as a heretic by many of his Jewish contemporaries, including Jews who had joined the Christian movement. With passion, and sometimes with exasperation, Paul rejected the accusation of heresy. Through his encounter with the Christian Jewish community he came to see that it was they, following Jesus, who were carrying out the mission given to Abraham and to Moses. The religion of Israel was always meant for the world. Abraham was to be the father of *many* nations (Genesis 17:5, quoted Romans 4:18). Jesus freed Judaism from the cult-specific and sect-specific rules and regulations of contemporary Judaism. He opened Judaism up to embrace all peoples and he welcomed all to open their minds and hearts to God's love. Once Paul saw this, he was energised, as his heroic missionary activity and letters show. He came to see what genuine monotheism must mean, and it did not mean changing one's culture. It meant embracing genuine love with all its demands, including the refusal to sell one's soul to the establishment – something that carried with it the risk of martyrdom. It meant believing that God's love was not exclusively directed to Jews, but was offered to everyone. Of course, like the Jews, others seeking to join the Christian 'Way' had to make some radical decisions, including letting go elements of their religious security. But the Good News preached by Paul offered them a profound freedom, which included a respect for themselves and a conviction that God is indeed love. It gave a meaning that transcended race and religious upbringing.

Is this not similar to the situation in which we find ourselves? Aren't we, too, presented with a challenge that could be as fulfilling and as demanding as that faced by Jesus and Paul? Is their vision so alien to us? The Christian message captured the imagination of the Roman Empire, and with Saint Patrick and others reached beyond the Roman Empire. It has continued to capture the imagination of people from all cultures ever since. Have we lost our nerve? Are we copying the Jews of Jesus' day who preferred the security of obedience and conformity to the daring

attraction of Jesus, who was forced to curse the fig tree that was all leaf and no fruit. He emptied the temple that was locking people away from the new revelation that could capture their hearts, make sense to their inquiring minds, and engage their energy to embrace a life they sensed was truly worth living?

Religion can be the opium of the people. It can be a refuge for the narrow-minded, bigoted and fearful. But it doesn't have to be that, and if we truly embraced our rich Catholic tradition we would be challenged to stop using fear to bring about conformity. Life experience has long since passed that by, except for those who have not known any other way.

We were not acting in response to Jesus' revelation of God when we piled up a huge list of mortal sins – a list that makes no sense to the younger generation. Of course there was, and there still is, a value in naming behaviour that flows from grace, and distinguishing it from behaviour that issues from the polluted sources traditionally named as the 'seven capital sins': pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. (We could, perhaps, suggest a more insightful list today). We need to name sin for what it is. However, it is not difficult to discern more of the Pharisee than of Jesus in the too ready use of mortal to describe behaviour as different as genocide and eating a few ounces of meat on Friday. Sins can be more or less serious, but even quite serious sins may not fit the definition of 'mortal sin' given us in the Catechism: sins that 'destroy charity', and 'turn a person away from God' (n. 2369). A serious illness is a serious illness, but it may not lead to death. To pile up a list of mortal sins, as was done for us, can lead only to scruples, or to the rejection of the whole system, since it flies in the face of experience and is at variance with the God revealed by Jesus.

Following the example of Jesus, and sustained by his Spirit, we are to promote a 'culture of life' that is attractive, and that searchers can appreciate. We have to be consistent, and to be on our guard against mixing fundamental wisdom with traditional taboos that do not make sense. To mix things up in this way is to run the risk of not being listened to. We have no right to compromise the truth in this way.

People talk too readily of 'Church teaching' without making the necessary theological distinctions. This does our mission considerable harm. When pastoral experience, theological investigation, and the spiritual sense of faithful Catholics are in harmony, the meanings and the values proposed can rightly be called 'Church teaching'. Other 'teachings' that lack such a consensus can be called 'the teaching of Pope X', or 'the teaching of many European theologians', but not yet 'Church teaching'. Furthermore, certain church teachings belong to the inner core of revealed truths. There are many layers of concentric circles surrounding these truths, till we get to the outer periphery where we are dealing with matters of much lesser importance, where what is proposed can, indeed, be a matter of opinion. To mix all these levels up and call everything that has found its way into catechisms over the centuries 'Church teaching' is to line up with the scribes and Pharisees, and make it as hard for the truth to penetrate people's minds and hearts today as it was for Jews in first century Palestine. We have to leave room for the Spirit of Jesus to say today: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...'.

We have been given a marvellous vision in Vatican II that has cleaned away layers of encrusted paint to reveal the beautiful primal wood. Religion does not have to be a partisan, sectarian, thing. It can be what it was for many of Jesus' contemporaries, that which engages our imagination, our hopes, our longings, our deepest thoughts to hold them in a marvellous harmony. This is the classical etymology of the word 'religion': from 'ligare'(to bind), and 're' back'. Genuine religion binds a community back to its centre, and binds the individuals who embrace it back to their hearts, hearts that long for the communion that can be enjoyed only when the human is embraced by the divine, as it was in the heart of Jesus.

Jesus once said: 'By their fruits you will know them' (Matthew 7:16). Paul said: 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2Corinthians 3:17). Our mission is a mission of love. People are longing for true freedom. People are sick of hypocrisy. People no longer implicitly trust those who claim authority. We've seen too much to be so naïve. People are longing to be respected, to be listened to, to be loved. People are longing for community that is not exclusive. People want to belong to the world, to the universe, because they know now that they are part of it. A multiplicity of 'gods' makes no sense for people who live in a global village. Monotheism that is sectarian is a stupidity. The word 'Catholic' is beautiful, relevant, essential. We have inherited it. Let us make it real. Let us dare to be 'the heart of God in the world'. God does not control the world. God loves the world. Let us stop seeking to control. Let us reject the techniques of the sects that lock onto people's weaknesses to achieve numbers and conformity. Let us relinquish the use of fear to gain adherence.

We have something beautiful to offer. Offer it with respect and love. Search for meaning. Want to know the truth. Don't overstate what you have discovered. Respect each person's experience and search. The God of Jesus is a God who has made us for eternal communion. Enriched by the Catholic experience of the past, let us offer from our richness as we listen to what others have discovered and are discovering. We cannot, even if we want to, regain the strength of the Catholic Church of the '50s. We should not want to because information has passed that Church by. We are in a richer world now. The real values of the '50s we need to help us live now. These must be distinguished from habits of thinking and believing and behaving that no longer make sense. At stake is 'salvation' – the healing of the wounds that continue to suppurate as the strong continue blindly to judge it as their right to dominate the weak when it appears to benefit their own self-interest. Only a genuine 'Catholic' vision can hear what Jesus was saying when he told us to love those we judge to be our enemies. Only a truly 'Catholic' vision can sustain the often desperate cry for peace that breaks from the hearts of so many today – perhaps especially from those still too young to have accepted the compromises that obscure the ideals of older people who have opted to be satisfied with a religious institution that seems to offer some security in a bewildering world. It won't do.

I am reminded of another saying of Teilhard. In an article entitled 'The Evolution of Chastity', written in 1934, he wrote: 'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire.' Why could that day be now? Only the Pentecost fire can purify our world and enflame our hearts.

When there is 'one flock and one shepherd' it will look very different from the Catholic Church we know, but we as Catholics have the privilege and the duty to keep the flame burning till our own hearts are pure and till everyone embraces the God revealed in the Heart of Jesus.

Salvation is offered to all

I. Second Vatican Council

1. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium 1964)

‘The effect of the Church’s mission is that
whatever good is found sown in people’s minds and hearts
or in the rites and customs of peoples,
these are not only preserved from destruction,
but are purified, elevated and perfected for the glory of God’ (§17).

2. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et Spes] 1965

‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age,
especially those who are in any way afflicted,
these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.
Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts,
for theirs is a community composed of men and women.
United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father
and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone’ (§1).

‘Linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ,
the Christian will hasten forward to resurrection
in the strength which comes from hope.
All this holds true not only for Christians,
but for all people of good will
in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way.

For, since Christ died for all people,
and since the ultimate vocation of every person is in fact one, and divine,
we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit
in a manner known only to God
offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.

Such is the mystery of the human person,
and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation.
Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful.
Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us.
Christ has risen,
destroying death by His death;
He has lavished life upon us so that, as ‘sons’ in the Son,
we can cry out in the Spirit ‘Abba, Father’ (§22).

‘The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit,
not only arousing in them a desire for the world to come
but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations
which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human
and to direct the whole earth to this end’ (§38)

II. Pope Paul VI

1. Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the modern world (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975)

‘It would be useful if every Christian and every evangeliser were to pray about the following thought: people can gain salvation also in other ways by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what Saint Paul called “blushing for the Gospel”(Romans 1:16) – or as a result of false ideas we fail to preach it? For that would be to betray the call of God, who wishes the seed to bear fruit through the voice of the ministers of the Gospel; and it will depend on us whether this grows into trees and produces its full fruit’(§80).

III. Pope John-Paul II

1. The Mission of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Missio 1990)

‘The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation (he then quotes GS 22)’ (§10).

‘The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the “seeds of the Word”, to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God himself ... The Spirit is at the very source of people's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of what it is to be human ... “The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end”(GS 38). It is the Spirit who sows the 'seeds of the Word' present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ’(§28).

‘We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart’(§29).

‘God does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors ... The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people’(§55).

‘Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills’(§56).