Rekindling the Christic Imagination

Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization

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Preface

In his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II marked the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and concluded: “Now that the Jubilee has ended I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the council as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.”¹

It has proved so for me. I had the wonderful privilege of studying in Rome during the four sessions of the Second Vatican Council. I experienced firsthand the intellectual excitement and spiritual energy of those years. The council and its magnificent documents have indeed provided “a sure compass” in my almost fifty years of priestly and theological ministry.

The council, as is well known, undertook its labors under the standards of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*. *Ressourcement* indicated the council’s effort to rediscover, with fresh eyes, the wellsprings of the faith, in particular the Scriptures themselves and the reception of and reflection upon the Scriptures by the early bishops and theologians of the church. In doing so, the council recovered a broader and deeper sense of tradition than had characterized Catholic understanding prior to the council.²

By *aggiornamento*, the council indicated its intention to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ proclaimed by the tradition into the world of today, addressing the aspirations and concerns of
contemporary men and women in language that speaks to them in a way both intelligible and pastorally inviting.

The council itself was able to hold these two movements of rediscovery and renewal in creative tension, channeling the centrifugal forces that could pull them apart. Concretely, bishops and theologians collaborated in composing the documents, enabling diverse voices to unite in contrapuntal harmony. This achievement was due in no small measure to the patient oversight and wise leadership of two bishops of Rome, Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI.

The “event” of the council cannot be restricted merely to its texts, the sixteen documents the council produced and promulgated; nor even to those exciting years, from October, 1962 to December, 1965, when the council was in session. It includes both these, of course; but it also comprises the years since, years in which the teachings and initiatives of the council were received and implemented. This “reception” of the council continues today. Hence the event of the council is continuing today.³

Most certainly, the texts have a privileged place in the ongoing interpretation of the council. They are the continuing point of reference and guide in our ever-new pastoral and theological labors. They constitute our compass. But compasses must be read, and they can be read accurately or inaccurately. Texts must be interpreted, and they can be interpreted selectively or comprehensively. Hence the challenge we face.

The challenge is to appropriate the texts of the council in a comprehensive way that does justice to all of the documents it bequeathed the church.⁴ Nonetheless, not all the documents of the council are of equal weight. The council itself signaled its intent by designating four of its documents as “constitutions,” hence as of primary importance: These are, of course, Sacrosanctum Concilium (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), Lumen Gentium (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), Gaudium
et Spes (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), and Dei Verbum (The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation). If these represent the interpretive keys to the council’s intentions, they must not be read in isolated fashion, but “intertextually,” tracing their interconnections and discerning the fundamental principles that guide the council’s vision.

Among the four, I maintain that Dei Verbum deserves to be considered a “first among equals.” The reason is simple. Unless God has revealed himself fully through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, then the church is without foundation and the liturgy a merely human construct. Dei Verbum makes this foundational claim: “By this revelation the deepest truth, both about God and about human salvation, shines forth for us in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation” (2).  

Postconciliar Crisis and Challenge

In the years following the council, the creative tension it embodied has often slackened. Without the complement of aggiornamento, ressourcement risks becoming mere antiquarianism: a museum tour through ancient artifacts. Without ressourcement, aggiornamento can easily slip into a cultural accommodation that lacks substance: salt losing its savor. Without fruitful dialogue and faith-filled exchange, bishops and theologians risk becoming partisans of causes, viewing each other with suspicion. The postconciliar years have, unhappily, all too often witnessed such division.

Partial and partisan readings of the council and its documents account for some of the fragmentation and polarization we have experienced. But I suggest that these are symptoms of a more severe crisis: an eclipse of the enlivening and unifying center of the faith. That center is Jesus Christ himself, crucified under Pontius Pilate, risen and present as Lord and head of his body,
the church. Absent this concrete and vivifying center, fragmentation and division ensue.

At first blush, this claim may appear overstated. Do not Catholics affirm the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ at every liturgy, making their every prayer “through Jesus Christ our Lord”? Indeed they do. Yet there remains the sad and intractable fact that attendance at liturgy on the part of Catholics has precipitously declined since the council. Moreover, in some theological circles, an odd aversion to affirmations of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ has taken hold. One manifestation of this is the relative neglect of the “Constitution on Divine Revelation” since the council—as though its robust confession of the revelatory primacy of Jesus Christ is “too hard a word,” echoing the disciples who turn away from Jesus in John’s gospel (John 6:60).

I am not alone in offering this diagnosis of our present plight. In a remarkable cri du coeur, Benedict XVI spoke of what impelled him to write his books on Jesus of Nazareth. He wrote: “[faith’s] point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.” Benedict is referring here to certain trends in biblical scholarship that either disclaim any solid knowledge of Jesus or reduce him to a prophetic figure in the history of Israel. Such academic ruminations invariably infiltrate via the media to wider audiences.

Lest the assertion appear to be special pleading, a prominent Catholic New Testament scholar seconds Benedict’s alarm. Luke Timothy Johnson laments that “the truth of the Gospel concerning Jesus the Lord has been eroded over a period of centuries, not through direct attack by Christianity’s cultured despisers, but through a steady process of revision by theologians who seem either unaware of or not to care about the consequences of their capitulation to the premises of Christianity’s cultured despisers.” Nor does Johnson spare bishops their share of responsibility for
the "Christological collapse" that he discerns. He decries their "failure adequately to address the erosion of the heart of the Gospel."9

As a final witness to this loss of cogent and compelling Christocentricity, I cite the late Cardinal Avery Dulles. In the last book he prepared for publication, literally as he lay dying, Cardinal Dulles wrote of tendencies in contemporary Catholic theology "that inhibit a vigorous program of evangelization." Foremost among them is what he calls "soteriological pluralism": the tendency among some theologians "to deny that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world." In the name of "openness" and "tolerance," they hold that each religion has its own way of salvation. Jesus may be the savior for Christians, but this confession need not preclude acknowledgement of other savior figures.10 Such a view clearly compromises the Christic center of faith taught by the council. It provides no basis or motivation for a new evangelization.

My conviction is that the way forward to a comprehensive reception of the council lies in the direction that Dei Verbum has affirmed: the way that recognizes in Jesus, crucified and risen, the Word of God in person. Dei Verbum confesses that "Jesus completes the work of revelation . . . above all by his death and his glorious resurrection from the dead, and his sending of the Spirit of Truth." Revelation, in sum, is the joyful realization that in Christ "God is with us, to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life" (4).

Such insistence on the centrality of Christ by no means detracts from the trinitarian content of the faith. The documents of Vatican II, Dei Verbum and Lumen Gentium in particular, testify to this. They are explicitly Christocentric and also replete with trinitarian confession and affirmation. How could it be otherwise, since the church proclaims Jesus to be the eternal Son of the Father?

Indeed, the sole theological basis for confessing the triune God is the claim the Apostolic Tradition makes regarding the
uniqueness of Jesus. Trinitarian theology is the necessary fruit of professing the divinity of Jesus. Further, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father sends, is not some anonymous, faceless force, but the Spirit of the Son mirrored in a multitude who pray in Jesus’ name. The Letter to the Galatians, written in the mid-first century, already proclaims the lived trinitarian faith: “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Gal 4:6).\(^{11}\)

Nor does a Christocentric approach to theology entail “Christomonism” (as some seem to fear)—the supposed exclusive emphasis on Jesus. For, as we have seen, one cannot do justice to Jesus short of seeing him within a fully trinitarian frame of reference. Moreover, as “the firstborn of the dead” (Col 1:18), Jesus is “the firstborn of many brothers and sisters” (Rom 8:29). Jesus Christ is, indeed, the Center, but the eschatological goal is the “recapitulation of all in Christ” (Eph 1:10). This eschatological goal inspires and sustains the prayer and action of believers.\(^{12}\) Thus the very heart of the pastoral-theological ministry of Saint Augustine is to foster the growth of the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, Head and members, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

The proper work of the Holy Spirit is to bring about the incorporation of men and women into Christ, thereby constituting the one body of redeemed humanity. Hence, in contrast to those who would separate Christ and the Spirit, I fully endorse Yves Congar’s axiom: “If I were to draw one conclusion from the whole of my work on the Holy Spirit, I would express it in these words: no Christology without pneumatology and no pneumatology without Christology.”\(^{13}\)

**The Present Work**

The present book, with its introduction and four sections, seeks to meditate upon this Christic Center\(^{14}\) of Catholic faith as it expands from its Center in Christ into the intimately interre-
lated realities of Eucharist, church, and, ultimately, Trinity. Karl Rahner has taught us to see synoptically: we contemplate not many discrete mysteries but the inexhaustible Mystery of the God who is love, revealing and saving by the outpouring of his love upon the world through the inseparable missions of Christ and the Spirit. The book thus hopes to offer in a unitary vision the distinctive content of Christian faith: the Glory of God on the face of Christ Jesus.

The presentation aims to be more meditative than discursive. Indeed, it aspires to offer a “mystagogical” meditation: one that evokes the Mystery to which it inadequately points.\textsuperscript{15} Thus the four works of art that accompany the sections are integral to the book's purpose. It hopes thereby to further the project, heralded by Hans Urs von Balthasar, of restoring the aesthetic to full citizenship in the theological enterprise. In addition, it seeks to foster another of von Balthasar's goals: a “praying theology”—one that arises from and leads to prayer.

Finally, the book aspires to be a modest contribution to the “New Evangelization” to which all the popes since the council have summoned the church. This evangelization is, at its heart, the call to renewed conversion to Jesus Christ and the passionate desire to share his Good News with others that they “may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). As Pope John Paul II wrote: “We are certainly not seduced by the naïve expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!”\textsuperscript{16}

I conclude this preface with words of gratitude for those whose friendship and companionship have sustained me during these postconciliar years and nourished my faith.

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I joyfully join Saint Paul in prayer: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. . . . I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:3, 6).

August 15, 2013

Solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady