

Item #9

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Catholicism as Shared Adventure

Fifty years ago this month over two thousand Catholic bishops from all over the world assembled in Rome for the first session of the Twenty-First Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church—usually referred to as “Vatican II”. The ideas contained in the texts of Vatican II have played a significant role in the aftermath of the closure of the council in 1965, both within the Church and without.

The reception of the ideas, i.e., the texts, of Vatican II by Catholics has not been uniform. There are differences about the council, some, it seems to me, legitimate, some quite illegitimate. From my contact in Rome with the bishops of the council during all four years in which the Council was in session (admittedly my contact was rather superficial), I never had the impression that they thought that what they were deciding was a radical break with the past. A radical development, even a radical change if you will, yes. But not a radical break. The bishops, and certainly Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, looked on the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church as one and the same.

In order to reach a balanced understanding of what

the texts of Vatican II mean one must have a balanced hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the art of interpreting written texts. It involves, basically, the proper self-awareness of an objective truth to be known and of the proper self-awareness of the one trying to know it. In the field of Scripture studies hermeneutics plays an important part, for it enables the interpreter to have a proper introspective awareness of what he is about. (Of course, in the case of a text which is the object of faith such as Scripture, the proper self-awareness of both object and subject is more challenging to attain.)

But Scripture is not the only text where hermeneutics is crucial. The Constitution of the United States is also a text where the interpreter must have the proper introspective self-awareness. The texts of Vatican II must be approached as an objective truth to be interpreted with the proper introspective self-awareness. And, by extension, any collection of phenomena which need interpretation can legitimately be subject to “hermeneutics” in a broad sense. For example, the whole post-conciliar scene in the Catholic Church needs a proper hermeneutics for its interpretation.

One insightful approach to hermeneutics is that of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur. He developed a thought-provoking hermeneutics which he called the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, in which the need for a balanced self-awareness as regards objective truth and subjective knower is skillfully outlined. But, as sometimes happens in fields of human endeavor, a balanced self-awareness is quite difficult to achieve, and a “hermeneutics of suspicion” can run amok,

even to the point of a deliberate will to disbelieve objective evidence because of subjective perspective. Witness, for example, the first chapter of Mary Eberstadt's masterful book *Adam and Eve after the Pill*, in which she compares the deliberate refusal by many persons in the United States today to refuse to recognize the tragic effects of the "sexual revolution" in the United States to the refusal of some people to recognize the evils of the Soviet Union. Perhaps one would not be far wrong to characterize such aberration as a refusal to give credence to the obvious, a sort of "nay-saying as addiction".

One astute observer has labeled such an unbalanced form of the hermeneutics of suspicion in the extended sense as "the reduction of wonder to banality". G.K. Chesterton, the English convert of a century ago, would have understood. For him, a balanced introspective self-awareness of the objective phenomena of his life was always at fever pitch. He delighted in rain because it was wet. He delighted in children because they were themselves. And he delighted in the Eucharist because it was God with us. Chesterton lived constantly in a world of wonders which were never banal, be they natural or supernatural.

With all of this all-too-brief presentation of the need for a balanced hermeneutics of suspicion in interpreting texts, let us consider briefly this evening the Pastoral Constitution on "The Church in the Modern World", known by its Latin name of "*Gaudium et Spes*" ("Joy and Hope"). *Gaudium et Spes* was approved by Paul VI on December 7,

1965. It is important to note at the outset that it is addressed not only to Catholics in particular and all Christians in general but to the entire world. The Council desires to “explain to everyone how it conceives the presence and function of the Church in the world of today” (§ 2). But even if the document is addressed to the entire world, it is clear that the primary responsibility for explaining it belongs to Catholics, for it is their Church which is being explained and they are the ones who are its members. If the members do not have a balanced view of what the document says, who can expect non-Catholics to have one?

Chapter I of *Gaudium et Spes* is about “The Dignity of the Human Person”. The dignity of the human person is a basic principle in Catholic thinking and in Catholic living. The concept “person” underlies all of the Church’s history. The first ecumenical councils are a history of the Church’s coming to an ever-greater introspective awareness of what it objectively means to be a person—Nicea I, Constantinople I, Ephesus and Chalcedon. The latter council in 451 constituted the climax of this initial view of the person. For it was in this council that Christ was defined as one Person with two natures. In technical terms, what the council fathers solemnly approved was the doctrine of the Hypostatic Union: Christ was a Divine person with two natures, one Divine, the other Human. This insight about the Divine Person who is Christ, and the concomitant insights about the Divine Person who is the Father and the Divine

Person who is the Holy Spirit, constitute the dogmatic foundation of the orthodox Christian view of God, that He is Three in One. And these insights eventually led to a deeper insight into the exceptional character of the human person, a being created in God's image (*Gaudium et Spes*, § 12), who knows and wills (§ 15, § 17), whose dignity must always be respected, and who, like the Christian God, lives in a community of persons (cf. § 12, §§ 23-25). Chesterton has put it well: "... to us Trinitarians (if I may say it with reverence)—to us God Himself is a society".

But this insistence of the Church on the unique status of the human person ("human exceptionalism", as the current language has it), along with any other position taken by the Church in the face of challenges to orthodox Christian faith and morals, must be accompanied by a sane hermeneutics of suspicion if it is to be interpreted in all its depth. And here Chesterton, the convert to Catholicism, once more comes to our assistance with a key insight—*the* key insight necessary to make the hermeneutics of suspicion maintain its balance for a Catholic no matter what the challenge—the romance of orthodoxy:

This is the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy. ...

There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. ... The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions, the orthodox Church was never respectable. ... It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To

have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect”

(“The Paradoxes of Christianity”, *Orthodoxy*)

I propose to use Chesterton’s criterion of Catholic orthodoxy to help achieve a balanced self-awareness as regards applying principles set forth in *Gaudium et Spes* to new problems confronting the Church in the contemporary world, problems which *Gaudium et Spes* had not foreseen or not taken an explicit stand on.

Take, for example, the proposal made by some today that non-human animals are persons. The personhood of animals is not just a flight of fancy, as a look at recent books by Gary L. Francione makes clear. The positions of the Princeton professor Peter Singer also merit examination in this regard. To see a balanced evaluation in the light of the Catholic teaching on the human person I recommend consulting works by Wesley J. Smith who is abreast not only of this problem but also of other aspects of the much larger question of human exceptionalism. All his presentations are made on the basis of an orthodox Catholic view of the human person.

An instance in which *Gaudium et Spes* outlined principles of Catholic orthodoxy and was aware of a

problem but without attempting the key decision necessary to resolve it, was the vexed question of artificial contraception. In its section “Fostering the Nobility of Marriage and the Family” (§§ 47-52) the council reiterated the orthodox Catholic view of the dignity of married life and the centrality of the family in human society. The application of this view to the concrete problem of the use of “the pill” and other artificial means of contraception came three years after the close of the council in the form of *Humanae Vitae*, one of the most controversial documents of the modern papacy. At the time of its publication *Humanae Vitae* was received with polite disdain by many if not most Catholics here in the United States. It was ridiculed by many Christians even though it simply applied the orthodoxy of previous decisions within the Catholic Church (decisions which had been uniformly shared by other, non-Catholic Christians as well). It can safely be said that the majority of Catholics in the United States today do not seem to follow the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. But it can also be safely said that time has arguably vindicated its prophecies of disaster in matters regarding marriage and the family, as the final chapter of Mary Eberstadt’s *Adam and Eve after the Pill* indicates convincingly.

The recent maneuvers involving the use of artificial contraception by the present administration of the federal government in Washington to divide Catholics and help facilitate the imposition of the government’s own norms on Catholics as regards artificial contraception have succeeded

remarkably well. But apart from the central question of freedom of religious practice which they have raised, they have also unintentionally brought the whole question of artificial contraception onto the national scene in a way that has never happened in this country. And all of the resulting discussion is by no means negative. One has only to reflect on the fact that a newspaper like *The Washington Post* deems it worthwhile to publish articles by Ashley McGuire, for example, to appreciate the positive new element which has been introduced into the secular discussion on a national scale. But, of course, the dean of Catholic authorities on an orthodox interpretation of *Humanae Vitae* remains Janet Smith.

Gaudium et Spes also has much to say about culture, and about the rightful distinction between the orders of knowledge involving faith and reason. Man has the right to seek truth according to the norms proper to each of these two domains (§ 15, § 49) and the consequent use of his free will to seek what is good (§ 15). In terms of classical Thomism, the intellect is the “form” of the will, giving it direction and purpose: this is the basis for the primacy of reason in the orthodox Catholic view of the primacy of knowledge as the basis for wisdom and man’s quest for what is good (§§ 15-17). By the intellect a person arrives at what is true, and by the will the person chooses this truth as a good. But this primacy of reason in human affairs is being challenged by another view which holds for the primacy of choice, i.e., the will. That is to say, freedom means that our

choices are what determine what makes the truth of our lives, rather than truth determining our choices. The will is what sets the parameters of human choice, not the intellect. According to this contemporary view, the more choices differ among themselves the better, for in this way the full range of the human spirit becomes manifest: letting the search for the knowledge of objective truth serve as the basis for our personal choices is outmoded. James Kalb is the Catholic thinker who has pioneered an orthodox Catholic response to this aberrant way of looking at a crucial aspect of contemporary culture.

It should be noted that all of the thinkers cited above who are fending off new challenges to Catholic teaching are members of the laity. They are living out what Vatican II called for in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actualitatem*, [“Apostolic Activity”], § 13). In all of the three challenges to the traditional teaching of the Church the norm of orthodoxy argues in favor of the exceptional nature of the human person as opposed to non-human animals, in favor of the acceptance of *Human Vitae* by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and in favor of the truth of human lives as being based on intellect and not on will. Other examples could be adduced, but the three challenges outlined above are of paramount importance. Widespread acceptance of any of the contentions embedded in the above three challenges to the established wisdom of contemporary culture could result in a change in the way which humans live which would be unimaginable. In the

case of sexual mores and family life, that radical change has already taken place in the United States to no small extent.

But the above account for the role of orthodoxy as a norm for achieving proper self-awareness as part of a balanced hermeneutics of suspicion is not really sufficient to understand what Catholic orthodoxy really is, as Chesterton himself would be the first to admit. For he himself has given us the key to the fuller understanding of Catholic orthodoxy. In his account of orthodoxy given above he says that for the Church to have avoided all the myriad fads through which the Church has passed has been “one whirling adventure”. “Adventure” is the key word. Elsewhere Chesterton has written in his book *Orthodoxy* that “Man must have just enough faith in himself to have adventures, and just enough doubt of himself to enjoy them”. I understand this in the sense that when faced with the possibility of an adventure a Christian must trust in the gifts God has given him, but then must at the same time realize that any real adventure depends on God’s Providential Care to be brought to a successful completion. And if this is true of the adventures of any one Christian it is above all true of the adventure of the Church of which we are all members. For all Catholics have a right—and a duty!—to share in the adventure of the Church and of the Church’s avoidance of fads through the guidance of the principle of orthodoxy. And the principle of orthodoxy is only the external manifestation of the guidance of Divine

Providence from without and the Holy Spirit from within. If we Catholics are to enjoy the adventure we are participating in we must mistrust ourselves if we are going to trust in the God who will see us safely to our goal.

G.K. Chesterton ends his book *Orthodoxy* with praise for “The Romance of Orthodoxy”. The pursuit of Orthodoxy and the living of Orthodoxy has been for me indeed a wonderful challenge and a wonderful aid in the mistrust of myself necessary for the supreme adventure of life. The Church in this country and elsewhere, if I be not mistaken, faces serious opposition, perhaps even overt persecution, in the not-too-distant future. I recommend the romance of orthodoxy as a helpful imaginative stance in the facing of this future. Perhaps one other instance where orthodoxy can be a safe guide in confronting a contemporary fad can be found in these words of Chesterton: “If we wish to pull down the prosperous oppressor we cannot do it with the new doctrine of human perfectibility; we can do it with the old doctrine of Original Sin.”

In his book *Orthodoxy* Chesterton takes the spiritually curious reader on an intellectual quest. While looking for the meaning of life, Chesterton finds that Christian orthodoxy uniquely fulfills his needs. This orthodoxy is the truth revealed in Christianity. Chesterton likens this discovery to a man, armed with the security that only Christian orthodoxy can give, setting off from the south

coast of England. He journeys at sea for many days, only to arrive at Brighton, the point of his native land from which he had originally set forth. Such a man, now outfitted with a more profound awareness of Christian orthodoxy, an awareness enriched by adventure at sea, would see orthodoxy tied up with the place he grew up in with newly appreciative eyes. And, as a result, his native place to him is now the same, orthodox place he left, only more so. And his orthodoxy has made it possible for him to see anew the basic continuity of his life, the basic reason for why he remains the person he is.

Fifty years ago this month the Barque of Peter began an adventure at sea. Armed with the orthodoxy of nineteenth-century years it set sail on the uncharted waters of the contemporary world. In just this way, the Barque of Peter had set sail so many times in the past on the uncharted waters of contemporary worlds. And now, fifty years later, it is returning to a strange land which is also wonderfully familiar. The Barque of Peter is as orthodox as ever, but the past fifty years have deepened this orthodoxy so that it now has a more profound sense of who it really is—the same Barque of Peter it has always been, only more so. You see the Barque has been faced with the possibility of an adventure and as usual the Barque has had enough trust in itself to accept the adventure and enough mistrust of itself to enjoy it.

Sixty-seven years ago last August a 17-year old boy from the goodly burg of Webster Groves entered the Jesuit

novitiate at Florissant, Missouri. This young man came well equipped with the basic tools of a good education thanks to Holy Redeemer Grade School and Saint Louis University High School. In particular he came with a knowledge and love of G.K. Chesterton's book *Orthodoxy* which a discerning senior English teacher had put into his hands when he was sixteen years old. In the intervening sixty-seven years the seventeen-year old boy has been in a great variety of places and has met a great variety of people and has had a great variety of experiences. And now he finds himself back where he started from. Despite the great variety he has experienced he is the same person he was when he entered the Jesuit novitiate, but only more so. For he learned even before he departed the goodly burg of Webster Groves that to remain always the same in life as he faced constant variety and change he must have orthodoxy as his guide. Looking back he can now say that at the age of seventeen he was faced with the possibility of an adventure. With God's help he had enough trust in himself to accept this adventure, and enough mistrust of himself to enjoy it.

Thank you.

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