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Anti-Pluralism: Influence of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure on the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger

By Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren, OP

In his “Presentation of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*,” Joseph Ratzinger expresses his concern regarding the debate on the relationship of Christianity to other religions, in which he believes there is a widespread acceptance that all religions are of equal value in helping to gain salvation for their members.¹ He is particularly worried that this conviction is accepted not only in theology, but also among the Catholic faithful. Underlying this pluralist theology of religion are the following philosophical and theological presuppositions: the belief that divine truth is ineffable; a relativistic attitude towards truth; deep opposition between Western and Eastern modes of thought; subjectivism as the only source of knowledge; anti-metaphysics in theology; superficial eclecticism in theological research and disregard of church tradition in the study of scripture.²

Ratzinger believes that this kind of thinking eventually leads to seeing the person of Jesus as just another historical figure. It also leads to the denial of the absolute being of the Christian God as revealed in history. There are some moderate theologians who, while recognizing Jesus Christ as true God and true man, think that this revelation of God must be seen in relation to other possible revelations, like the other great religious founders. This means that the church, its dogmas and sacraments have no absolute value.³

In view of the above beliefs, Ratzinger laments that the ideology of dialogue has taken the place of mission and the call to conversion even in Catholic theological discourse. Dialogue is no longer understood as a way to discover the truth, but is reduced to an exchange of opinions with the aim of achieving cooperation and integration among the different religions. Ratzinger thinks that the principle of toleration promoted by the Second Vatican Council is being manipulated to include the acceptance of other religious beliefs as of equal value to Christianity. This kind of toleration avoids confronting questions of truth. He maintains that if the

question of truth is not considered, then it is no longer possible to distinguish between true faith and superstition, and yet, the positive value in any religion lies precisely in its truth. Ratzinger asserts:

The good that is present in the various religions offers paths toward salvation and does so as part of the activity of the Spirit in Christ, but the religions themselves do not ... Goodness and truth, wherever they may be, come from the Father and are the work of the Holy Spirit. The seeds of the Logos are cast abroad everywhere. Yet we cannot shut our eyes to the errors and illusions that are present in these religions.⁴

Thus Ratzinger insists that respect and regard for other religious beliefs can neither diminish the unique status of Jesus Christ nor restrict the missionary vocation of the church. This motive is rooted in the mystery of Christ who is true God and true man.⁵ Ratzinger believes Christianity is flourishing in parts of Asia due to the inherent deficiencies of the local beliefs.

This paper attempts to show how Ratzinger’s study of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure shapes his attitude towards religious pluralism. Together with his own understanding of the church as a necessity for salvation, they strengthen his conviction on the superiority of Christianity, Catholic Christianity in particular, over and above any other faith, as a path to salvation.

St. Augustine

A “decided Augustinian,” Joseph Ratzinger follows the Augustinian *credo ut intelligam* maxim according to which belief is a necessary prerequisite for understanding, “just as creation comes from reason and is reasonable, faith is, so to speak, the

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fulfilment of creation and thus the door to understanding.”⁶ As a student, he found scholasticism too dry and impersonal, but in the works of Augustine (354 – 430), he found “the passionate, suffering, questioning man is always right there, and you can identify with him.”⁷ Alfred Läpple, the prefect in Ratzinger’s seminary in Freising, in an interview given soon after Ratzinger was elected pope, says, “He’s not interested in defining God by abstract concepts. An abstraction – he once told me – didn’t need a mother.”⁸

As a writer, Ratzinger continues to draw inspiration from Augustinian thought as he says, “Augustine has kept me company for more than twenty years. I have developed my theology in a dialogue with Augustine, though naturally I have tried to conduct this dialogue as a man of today.”⁹ He acknowledges that Augustine’s theology grew out of “polemic against error,” for without error, “movement of a living, spiritual kind is hardly thinkable.”¹⁰

Augustine said, “Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand.” This is what Ratzinger would have written, for he believes that faith is a gift from God and the dogmas of the church cannot be changed. His theology and intellectual gifts are not meant to create new things, but to preserve what God has revealed and to teach the faithful the deposit of faith as he says, “This is His Church and not a laboratory for theologians... We are servants and don’t ourselves determine what the Church is.”¹¹ In fact, Ratzinger believes that the crisis in the Catholic faith lies in the understanding of ecclesiology. He writes:

My impression is that the authentically Catholic meaning of the reality ‘Church’ is tacitly disappearing, without being expressly rejected. Many no longer believe that what is at issue is a reality willed by the Lord himself. Even with some theologians, the Church appears to be a human construction, an instrument created by us and one which we ourselves can freely reorganize according to the requirements of the moment.¹²

Ratzinger fears that without a supernatural view of the church, but with only a sociological understanding, Christology loses its divine substance. The church becomes a purely human structure and the gospel becomes just a “Jesus-project.”¹³

In his doctoral dissertation, *The People and the House of God in Augustine’s Doctrine of the Church*, Ratzinger identifies two main points in Augustine’s ecclesiology: his understanding of the church as people of God and his concept of love in his portrait of the church as the house of God. In his youth, Augustine’s struggled with authority and skepticism led him eventually to the idea of faith which included joining the universal church: “Because of man’s wounding through sin, the Church now becomes a necessary stage in the ascent of the soul to Wisdom.”¹⁴

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In ancient times, people believed salvation could be attained only by a few enlightened people. Augustine was thus deeply impressed by the Christian claim to be the “royal highway” to salvation universally accessible to all people, and the church which offered to mediate to both the learned and simple folk. Augustine accepted communion with the church as a way of faith rather than as a purely metaphysical search current in his time. He had realized that truths come from faith.¹⁵ In his *Confessions*, Augustine laments that the vision of God cannot be sustained in our memory due to our human weakness. He also realizes that the human being cannot take the divine food in its pure form but needs the help of the church.¹⁶

Initially Augustine’s understanding of the church and the Christian faith was philosophical, his writings dealt with Platonist themes. He gradually moved towards the salvation-historical approach of the scriptures, which appeals to Ratzinger. Augustine started from a metaphysical theology and moved towards a more historical understanding of Christianity. The concrete historical form of Christianity is the church: “The historical saving activity of God and its living presence in the Church... belong entirely within the provisional and transient sphere of *mundus hic*.”¹⁷

Gradually Augustine identified the church, the people of God, in the concrete world of reality. In the same way, as Ratzinger sees it, the human person is no longer just a sensuous being, but lives according to itself, serving its own purpose. The spiritual is not just the ideal, but lives according to God’s will. Ratzinger affirms Augustine’s transformation of the Neo-platonic dualism of the world into historical terms of accepting or rejecting God’s grace, which is closer to the biblical understanding of human existence.¹⁸ Needless to say, the necessity of the church for salvation in

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Ecumenical Trends

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Augustinian thought remains ingrained in Ratzinger's theology and shaped his rather negative attitude towards religious pluralism.

In Augustine's theology, Ratzinger highlights charity in the ecclesiological context. This is called "objective charity" and it means "belonging to the Church, and more specifically to that Church which itself lives in charity... in eucharistic love-relationship with (other Christians in) the whole world."¹⁹ The real meaning of charity in this context is grace and the Holy Spirit. The "holy Church" is found within the Catholic Church, but is not identified with it. The Catholic Church consists of saints and sinners growing together until the Kingdom comes. Ratzinger writes:

Augustine can say: The Catholic Church is the true Church of the holy. Sinners are not really in her ... But on the other hand, he can stress that it is no part of the Church's business to discharge such sinners ... It is the Lord's task, who will awaken her (at the End) and give her the true form of her holiness.²⁰

Augustine's philosophical understanding of salvation is now transformed into being in the church and being-in-love. He has made the church a crucial aspect of our salvation in Christ and he uses the term "People of God" at three levels: Israel, the spiritual church, and the Catholic Church.²¹

Ratzinger in his study of Augustine also shows us how the sacrifice of Christ becomes the sacrifice of all humanity. This means that no one lives outside the true worship of the City of God. We are all united with Christ by his spirit, which is also his grace: charity is spread all over the world, in the hearts of men and women, by the Holy Spirit. This charity enables us to transcend the boundaries of individuals and to enter into communion with the church which is Christ's body found in the sacrament of the Eucharist.²²

In the *The Ratzinger Report*, Ratzinger says that he would like to write on original sin if he goes back to academia: "In fact, if it is no longer understood that man is in a state of alienation... one no longer understands the necessity of Christ the Redeemer." He believes the "whole structure of the faith is threatened by this."²³ This is another of Ratzinger's Augustinian traits. In *Confessions*, Augustine reveals his pessimism regarding human nature. He stresses the perdition of humankind and man's total dependence on God's grace to find salvation. The conversion of Augustine interests Ratzinger greatly because it deals with the saint's return to God, then to his church where the Incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ resides. Augustine's conversion, from a philosophical standpoint, leads one to the question of religion. The question of ontology and metaphysics is fundamental here. Ratzinger believes contemporary philosophy and theology must return to the ultimate principle that the pluralists and relativists of theology have abandoned.

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In his interview with Peter Seewald, Ratzinger says "I have never tried to create a system of my own, an individual theology... The point of departure is first of all the word. That we believe the word of God, that we try really to get to know and understand it, and then, as I said, to think it together with the great masters of the faith. This gives my theology a somewhat biblical character and also bears the stamp of the Fathers, especially Augustine."²⁴ As a theologian, Ratzinger is praised for his erudition rather than for his creativity. Liberal critics consider this his shortcoming while his conservative supporters think it is his strength.

St. Bonaventure

In his introduction to the study of St. Bonaventure (1221–1274), Joseph Ratzinger claims that people are concerned with philosophical and theological issues in times of great crisis in the historical process itself. He gives the example of Augustine's *City of God*, which deals with the bitter self-questioning concerning the fall of Rome. The second high point of such self-questioning is found in Bonaventure's examination of the biblical story of creation in his *Collationes in Hexaemeron*. Ratzinger's postdoctoral dissertation entitled *The Theology of History in St Bonaventure* was also very much in the Augustinian tradition. It is an analysis of this great Franciscan theologian's interpretation of the twelfth century mystic and prophet, Joachim of Fiore's (1135 – 1202) concept of history.

The idea of salvation history was becoming popular in Catholic theology in the 1950s. It had cast new light on the notion of revelation as not just simply "a communication of truths to the intellect but as a historical action of God in which truth becomes gradually unveiled."²⁵ Neo-scholasticism had confined the idea of revelation to the intellectual realm. As a "decided Augustinian," this new historical understanding of revelation excited Ratzinger. In time, his understanding of revelation as the act of God showing himself, and not the object he reveals, manifests itself as the basis for the Vatican II's document, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, to which Ratzinger contributed a great deal. But at the time of his *habilitation*, it was still not accepted, especially by Professor Schmaus, one of the readers of his thesis.²⁶

In his research on this topic, Ratzinger had found out that the concept of "revelation" as we know it now is foreign to theologians in the thirteenth century. During the High Middle Ages, revelation was thought of as an act in which God shows himself, and "not to the objectified result of this act."²⁷ The receiving subject is always part of revelation and this means that if no one is there to receive it, revelation does not occur. Thus by definition, revelation requires someone who can apprehend it. Ratzinger argues that if Bonaventure is right, then revelation precedes scripture. Revelation is not simply identical with scripture, but is greater than what is merely written. Ratzinger also claims that there can be no such thing as purely *sola scriptura* because "an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of tradition is already given."²⁸

This understanding explains why Ratzinger remains vigilant and cautious in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. He exercises his "critical function," convinced that "in the field of ecumenism,

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misunderstanding, impatience and arbitrary action are more likely to push the goal further away than to bring it nearer.”²⁹ He rightly argues that “clear definitions of one’s own faith are of service to all, including one’s partner in dialogue” and that “dialogue can deepen and purify Catholic Faith but cannot alter it in its true essence.”³⁰

According to Augustine, history was transitory as shown by the rise and fall of empires. Only the eternal citizens of God remain. Its sacramental expression is the church, the people of God journeying towards the heavenly city of Jerusalem.³¹ This Augustinian concept of time has been replaced by Joachim’s understanding of history. In *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure reinterprets Joachim of Fiore’s concept of history in the sense that he does not entirely reject the idea as Thomas Aquinas did.

Joachim divided history into three epochs as divine progression: that of the Father (the Old Testament or period of the Patriarchs), the Son (the Church since the New Testament or period of the priests) and the Holy Spirit (the period of the laity), which was about to break into history. In the third period, the age of the laity, Joachim believed the structures of the state and church would give way to a perfect society of free persons led by the Holy Spirit from within. This exciting concept of history which Voegelin calls “the immanentization of the eschaton” means that the end of history is the product of history’s own inner movement towards greater perfection, in other words, the Kingdom of God on earth. Our modern understanding of “progress” has its roots in this philosophy from which diverse ideologies such as socialism and liberal capitalism sprang up. It affects our society profoundly and gives rise to aggressive secularism and even evolution.³² In fact, according to Eric Voegelin, the source of modernity can be traced to the speculations of Joachim of Fiore.³³

Joachim’s Gnostic speculations were being adopted by some Franciscans known as “spirituals.” Their radical interpretation of Franciscan poverty combined with Joachim’s apocalyptic interpretation created a revolutionary movement. Joachim believed he had found a basis in scripture for his belief that a time would come when the Church of the Spirit would emerge and the sons of St. Francis of Assisi would be the bearers of this new age. This interpretation created tension in the Franciscan Order and brought the spirituals out into open conflict with church authorities.³⁴ The spirituals threatened to split the Franciscan Order into two factions and create a schism. Bonaventure, the Minister General, had to deal with this crisis by addressing Joachim’s theories adopted by the spirituals.

Bonaventure acknowledged the possibility of a new age in human history exemplified in the person of St. Francis of Assisi. His response to the Joachimite question consisted not in a total rejection, but in a corrective interpretation. Whereas the Joachimites went against tradition in following their leader, Bonaventure would interpret him within tradition. Aidan Nichols says that Ratzinger appreciates this ecclesial reinterpretation of radical theologians rather than outright dismissal.³⁵ Gediminas T. Jankunas believes this shows that Ratzinger was not the absolutist as portrayed in the media. He never leaves out any traces of truth. There are always some elements of truth in any important theory and those elements must be singled out so that they can help to create a common ground.³⁶ I think this is a misguided understanding of Ratzinger’s

theological position. Ratzinger is convinced that “an error is all the more dangerous, the greater that grain of truth is, for then the temptation it exerts is all the greater.”³⁷

Nonetheless, Ratzinger in his thesis, approves Bonaventure’s treatment of Joachim, but he goes further in claiming that Catholic doctrine teaches only one “new age” – the second coming of Christ. Ratzinger also warns against Bonaventure’s tolerance of Joachim: “For, in a certain sense, a new, second ‘End’ is set up next to Christ. Even though Christ is the centre, the one who supports and bears all things, still he is no longer simply that *telos* in whom all things flow together and in whom the world is ended and overcome.”³⁸

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The significance of this study is important for understanding Ratzinger’s treatment of modern ideologies. His future dealings with philosophical and theological issues are likely to be deeply influenced by his study of Bonaventure’s analysis of Joachim’s concept of history. This is particularly true in his treatment of liberation theology based on a Marxist understanding of history, which has its roots in Joachim’s theory. Ratzinger accused liberation theologians of trying to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, of doing away with the institutional church and replacing spirituality with politics. The conclusion that Nichols draws is this: “Before the name ‘liberation theology’ was ever heard of, Ratzinger had to arrive at some judgment about this uncanny thirteenth-century anticipation of liberationist eschatology.”³⁹

St. Benedict

Joseph Ratzinger was elected pope on 19 April 2005 during the fourth ballot in the Sistine Chapel and he chose the name Benedict XVI. He wanted to continue to be a pope of peace, overcoming theological division within the church and reaching out to the Eastern Churches as did Benedict XV. Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI in his first homily hinted that he would promote dialogue within the church to heal real divisions, and also dialogue with other Christian churches and non-Christian religions.

By taking the name of Benedict of Nursia (480 – 547), who was patron saint of Europe and considered one of the great founders of Western monasticism and father of Western civilization,

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Ratzinger demonstrated his intention to focus on the church in Europe, which is going through a crisis of aggressive secularism. Although the Catholic Church in Latin America, Africa and Asia are flourishing, Europe needs to revive itself, and to rediscover its Christian soul. The West not only exports technology but also ideologies such as liberal capitalism and Marxism, both home grown in European soil. The philosophy of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” promotes distrust of all traditions and authorities, which some believe is the cause of crisis in Europe.⁴⁰ The churches in Europe are the sick members of the Body of Christ and they must be healed before they do further damage and spread their disease to other parts of the world.

Vincent Twomey thinks the recovery of the Christian roots of Europe is the only cure for the continent’s spiritual sickness. These roots are found not only in scripture and the church tradition, but also in Greek philosophical and Roman jurisprudential frameworks.⁴¹ From this Western perspective it does seem that Ratzinger’s whole life has been a preparation for this papacy. His early life experience and education based on the study of the classics, literature, philosophy and theology in the best of European and Enlightenment tradition prepared him well for this enormous task of combating modern secular ideologies and preserving Catholic orthodoxy in the West. He was considered by some as the most accomplished theologian to hold the papacy in a thousand years. However, Ratzinger’s theology seems to lack sensitivity towards Asian tradition with its plurality of religions and cultures because of his Western presuppositions and philosophical terminology.

Only the Truth will set you Free

Joseph Ratzinger’s theological position can be summarized in one phrase: “Only the truth will set you free” (John 8:23). To live a life of holiness is to live according to the truth revealed by God through Jesus Christ.⁴² This means that the person must reject the human hubris and absolute self-determination that positivism, relativism and Marxism promote. It requires a true conversion, an opening up to the One who is so much greater. Only then can we discover the truth as love and as a person. For Ratzinger, salvific truth was definitely revealed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as taught in the Christian tradition.⁴³

Ratzinger constantly stresses that this truth, the subject of faith, is entrusted to the Catholic Church. The human person can only receive faith from the church, which in turn does not have faith from itself, but from Jesus Christ. It is the church’s prime duty to guard this truth so that it remains the truth and is not lost in history. It is in the “sacramental structure of reality” that salvation and truth come to us.⁴⁴

The modern secular society has problems in accepting an already given truth. There is a fundamental conflict between Christian faith and contemporary Western thinking which also claims the prerogative of absolute self-determination. In *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Ratzinger says that in the past, the problem of the relation between “being” and “time” was solved in favor of “being.” But after Hegel, “being” becomes “time.” Ratzinger believes that the failure of scientific progress, Marxism, etc., to satisfy the deepest longing of human beings lies in their philosophical presuppositions:

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Being itself is now regarded as time; the logos becomes itself in history. It cannot be assigned, therefore, to any particular point in history or be viewed as something existing in itself outside of history; all its historical objectifications are but movements in the whole of which they are parts. ... Truth becomes a function of time; the true is not that which simply *is* true, for truth is not simply that which *is*; it is true for a time because it is part of the becoming of truth, which *is* by becoming. This means that, of their very nature, the contours between true and untrue are less sharply defined; it means above all that man’s basic attitude toward reality and toward himself must be altered. In such a view, fidelity to yesterday’s truth consists precisely in abandoning it, in assimilating it into today’s truth; assimilation becomes the form of preservation.⁴⁵


This means that Christianity has meaning in its own specific way. It is true in its historical moment. It can continue to be true when assimilating into the current situation, “the newly developing whole.” Regarding Marxism, Ratzinger says the notion of truth in this ideology is regarded as an expression of the vested interest of a particular historical moment. Marxists deny the idea of enduring truth. They believe that what is true is what serves progress. However, Ratzinger insists that there must be a recognizable identity of man within himself and that truth must remain true in every historical moment. This is why he is opposed to relativism and the pluralist theology of religion which deny the notion of continuity of being in time: “The question of hermeneutics is, in the last analysis, the ontological one, the question of the oneness of truth in the multiplicity of its historical manifestations.”⁴⁶

For Ratzinger, the theology of liberation and the theology of religious pluralism share some common ground. Both theories resulted from the experience of life in the third world: liberation theology arises from the poverty of Latin America and the theology of religious pluralism calls attention to the fact that most of third world countries are non-Christian. They reflect the joys and hopes, the pains and anxieties that Vatican II speaks about.⁴⁷ Liberation theology seeks to establish the Kingdom of God on earth through political actions. The theology of religious pluralism affirms that elements of truth and grace can be found in non-Christian religions. Needless to say, Ratzinger regards liberation theology and religious pluralism as distorted versions of orthodox Christianity. They share a defective understanding of truth because they define truth as progress, and emphasize praxis rather than orthodoxy. In a speech given in Hong Kong in 1993, Ratzinger speaks of Christian universalism rather than religious pluralism:

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The point of departure of Christian universalism was not the drive to power, but the certainty of having received the saving knowledge and redeeming love which all men had a claim to and were yearning for in the inmost recesses of their beings. Mission was not perceived as expansion for the wielding of power, but as the obligatory transmission of what was intended for everyone and which everyone needed.⁴⁸

Conclusion

An important factor that reinforces Joseph Ratzinger's opposition to modern ideologies is his negative experience of the post-conciliar church: "It is incontestable that the last ten years have been decidedly unfavourable for the Catholic Church. ... Christians are once again a minority, more than they have ever been since the end of antiquity."⁴⁹ He speaks of boredom and discouragement in the church, a "progressive process of decadence" setting in.⁵⁰ He likens the church of the post-conciliar period to a huge construction site where the blueprint has been lost. Everyone continues to build the church according to his fancies because a critical spirit has set in. Ratzinger blames "the unleashing *within* the Church of latent polemical and centrifugal forces."⁵¹ We can conclude that by this he includes the theology of religious pluralism among other forces. Joseph Ratzinger believes in a smaller but purer church. 

Notes:

1. Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 209.
2. *Ibid.*, 210.
3. *Ibid.*, 211.
4. *Ibid.*, 213 – 214.
5. *Ibid.*, 215.
6. Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 33. John Allen says that, like Ratzinger himself, Augustine's career as a theologian was interrupted by his elevation to the bishopric. His theological ideas were formed by the practical need to fight heresies. See John L. Allen, *Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 36.
7. *Ibid.*, 61.
8. Quoted in Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.
9. Quoted in Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 17.
10. *Ibid.*, 27.
11. Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 80.
12. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 45.
13. *Ibid.*, 46.
14. Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 21. My summary of Ratzinger's doctoral dissertation, *The People and the House of God in Augustine's Doctrine of the Church*, is drawn primarily from Nichols' fine analysis in this book. See also Gediminas T. Jankunas, *The Dictatorship of Relativism* (New York: St Paul's, 2011), 45 - 49 and Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology* ((San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 158-159, 331-332.
15. *Ibid.*, 20.
16. *Ibid.*, 21.

17. Quoted in Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 22.
18. Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 23.
19. *Ibid.*, 28.
20. Quoted in Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 28.
21. Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 29.
22. *Ibid.*, 31.
23. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 79.
24. Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 66.
25. Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 104. Aidan Nichols says, "Through Bonaventure's work, Ratzinger here encountered, and appropriated, the Christocentricity which was being discovered anew by Catholic dogmaticians in the 1950s. Indeed, Bonaventure pressed Christocentrism to the point of making the Christ who is the centre of all the centre, even, of all the sciences." Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 42.
26. Ratzinger wrote his habilitation under the guidance of Professor Söhngen. Professor Schmaus was a medieval theologian who rejected Ratzinger's work because he did not like his former pupil writing his field under someone else's tutelage. Ratzinger's thesis was initially rejected also because he used different analysis in his treatment of the concept of revelation. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 107-109.
27. *Ibid.*, 108.
28. *Ibid.*, 109.
29. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 155.
30. *Ibid.*
31. D. Vincent Twomey S.V.D., *Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 52.
32. *Ibid.*, 53. Ratzinger says that "Henri de Lubac has studied the subsequent history of Joachim's idea, which reaches out to Hegel and the totalitarian systems of our own century." Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 110.
33. *Ibid.*, 52.
34. Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 110.
35. Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 36. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 61-63.
36. Gediminas T. Jankunas, *The Dictatorship of Relativism* (New York: St Pauls, 2011), 52.
37. He made this remark in reference to the threat of liberation theology. See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 175.
38. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971), 114. Quoted in Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 44.
39. Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 43.

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Vatican II: World Church or “Church of the Little Flock”

By Alan Schreck

As we approach, the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, it does not take a prophet to say that this occasion will re-open the discussion of the “real” meaning of Vatican II, and whether the Council was actually beneficial or destructive for the Church and her mission. A few years ago I wrote a book, *Vatican II: The Crisis, and the Promise* and the crisis I refer to was a crisis of understanding what the Council actually meant, and resulting from this confusion, a crisis of implementing the Council consistently and effectively. Obviously, if the Council is understood (or misunderstood) in various ways, it will be variously implemented and applied.

Was the Second Vatican Council, as it came to be implemented and is being carried out today, “a blessing or a curse?” There are two extremes of response. Interestingly, on one side are our recent and present Popes, Blessed Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict, who affirm that the Council is, as Pope John Paul wrote in *Novo Millennio Ineunte (NMI)* 57, “the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century.” Pope Benedict referred to this statement and confirmed his agreement with it in his very first homily as Pope, and has repeated it since. For these popes, as well as for Pope John XXIII who convened the Council and for Pope Paul VI who continued and closed it, the teachings of Vatican II are God’s word for our time. They are, as John Paul also said in *NMI*, a “sure compass by which to take our bearings” in the century and millennium which has begun (57).

Then there are the vehement critics of the Second Vatican Council. There are two groups of critics on opposite extremes. There are those who were and are dissatisfied that the Council *did not go far enough* in its task of *aggiornamento*, bringing the Church “up-to-date, which for those critics meant conforming the Church to the demands and agenda of those promoting radical social, political, and liturgical change in the Catholic Church. They believe that the council did not go far enough in creating a “democratized” church or a church with an agenda focusing on social change, and such as justice and peace issues, women’s rights, and so on. Theologians such as Hans K ng, Gregory Baum, Richard McBrien, and Rosemary Reuther would be representative of these views.

On the other end of the spectrum are critics of the Council who believe that it went *too far* in changing the church. Indeed, many of them wonder why the Second Vatican Council was called in the first place, as they were largely satisfied with the post-Tridentine church of the early to mid 20th century. In their view, Vatican II opened the door to a resurgence of the Modernist heresy that had been condemned by Pope St. Pius X in the first decade of the 20th century. Many of them would equate the results of Vatican II as “modernism” and the secularization of the church, dismantling the church’s liturgy, and confusing her clear identity and mission. Of course, the schismatic Lefebvrite movement represents this position, and well as authors such as Englishman, Michael Davies, Atila Sinke Guimarães, author of *In the Murky Waters of Vatican II*, (Tan: 1997), and Christopher A Ferrara & Thomas E Woods, Jr.,

authors of *The Great Façade: Vatican II and the Regime of Novelty in the Roman Catholic Church*, (Remnant Press, Minnesota: 2002).

In this paper I will address these positions and hopefully provide a helpful framework for understanding and even resolving some of the tensions that emerged in the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council. To do this I would begin by posing the question of how we understand the Catholic Church after the Council: either as a “world church” or, to borrow a phrase from Karl Rahner, as “the church of the little flock.”

It has been said that the Second Vatican Council launched the Catholic Church into a new era as a “world church.” One might reasonably argue that the Catholic Church was already a strong, vital international institution before this Council, and had been so at last since the “age of exploration” began in the sixteenth century, with missionaries bringing the Catholic faith literally to the ends of the earth. However, by “world church” I mean more than the presence of Catholics throughout the world, but a mentality or world-view that the Second Vatican Council promoted that was and is different than before the Council. I might add here that this change of mentality was similar to the change in mentality regarding ecumenism. Before the Council most Catholics of the 20th century understood ecumenism simply as promoting the return of other Christians to the Catholic Church. Similarly, the mentality of many of the church’s leaders, the hierarchy, before Vatican II was very “Euro-centered.” Europe, particularly Western Europe and especially Italy, was the “center” of the church, and everything outside of Europe was, in some ways, still “mission territory” where the church was in the process of being planted. Vatican II’s teaching on papal infallibility and primacy supported this mentality. I am not speaking primarily of the official structures of the Catholic Church, although the vast majority of members of the Roman Curia at the time were Europeans, but a mentality that the fullest or most true embodiment of the church was Latin and European. We North Americans, especially in the United States, understand this well, as the European hierarchy continued to look upon the American approach to democracy and religious liberty as an experiment, and one that was compared with the historically concurrent French Revolution which turned out to be bitterly anti-religious (i.e. anti-Catholic) and which has tainted church-state relations in France and other parts of Western Europe every since.

The Second Vatican Council began to radically alter this Euro-centered mentality, though the process is still on-going. Pope Paul VI took a significant step forward in this by increasingly internationalizing the Roman curia and the College of Cardinals. This change was fostered by the presence and participation of all the world’s bishops at the Council. The views and perspectives of bishops

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from all parts of the world were heard regularly from the Council floor and in discussions outside the Council’s sessions, and as time went on these ‘international’ bishops became more confident and vocal in expressing their views. Their views impacted the Council and her teachings in many ways. This was evidence even in the first document discussed, the “Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy.” Most people think that the option for the use of vernacular languages instead of Latin in the Roman liturgy was just because of the work of liturgists of the modern “liturgical movement.” Yes, it is true that they advocated a “noble simplicity” in the liturgy and other changes that caused the liturgy today to resemble more closely the liturgy of the early Church. However, in addition bishops around the world favored the option of the vernacular and other forms of instrumentation and music in the liturgy as reflecting the richness and traditions of their own cultures. Hence the change of the liturgy substantially to vernacular languages within 5 to 10 years after the close of the Council indicates the movement toward a “world church.” At Pentecost, all heard the Gospel being proclaimed in their own tongue. After Vatican II nearly every Catholic in the world began to experience the same blessing.

The “world church” is also seen in a revitalized emphasis on missionary activity by the Council fathers. The focus of the document on the Church’s missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*, underscored the Catholic Church’s continuing emphasis on “making disciples of all nations” (cf Mt 28:19). The approach of inculturation – integrating whatever is good in the cultures of peoples into the life of the Church – was strongly affirmed. Missionary practices that undermine human dignity, such as offering food or medical help only to those interested in or willing to convert to Catholicism, are directly condemned. Vatican II’s emphasis on the rights and dignity of the human person – all human persons of whatever race, religion or culture – is strongly affirmed in many Council documents. The rights of all people freely to choose and practice authentic religion is clearly articulated in the “Declaration on Religious Liberty”, *Dignitatis Humanae*, which some have called “the American contribution to Vatican II” because it drew upon the teaching of American Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, who saw the value for the whole church of the American experience of religious freedom. This is based on the example and teaching of Jesus, who proclaimed the Good News of the kingdom by offering it freely but never imposing it. Respect for “whatever is true and holy” in other religions is taught in *Nostra Aetate*, the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions.” This document also expresses the church’s repentance and contrition for all past hatred or dis-

crimination by Catholics toward members of other non-Christian religions, especially Judaism. Even in the “Decree on Ecumenism,” dealing with the relationship of Catholics with other Christians, the focus is on what we have in common and how we can work together to promote causes called for by the Gospel of Christ, as well as how we can seek together ways to resolve and overcome the obstacles that divide us as Christians. These approaches are based on the firm belief that the full visible unity of all Christians throughout the world is the will of God, for which Jesus prayed (cf. Jn 17:21, “Father may they all be one...”).

The climatic document of the Council expressing the Catholic understanding of the church reaching out to and embracing the world is the last of the four Vatican II constitutions to be passed and promulgated, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” *Gaudium et Spes*, which was issued on the last day of the Council – December 7, 1965. *Gaudium et Spes* was not even among the numerous documents drafted and prepared before the Council began. However, it was a document that expresses well the vision of Pope John XXIII, who was pictured before the council standing next to a huge globe explaining that a Council was needed to address the concerns and longings of the modern world. This constitution eventually opened with the words: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”

The constitution came to birth with the plea of a South American bishop, Dom Helder Camara of Recife, Brazil, who asked how the council could only address church-related matters while over half the world’s population struggled with hunger, malnutrition, disease, and illiteracy. Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens of Belgium, one of the council’s four moderators, agreed that a distinction should be made between the Church within herself (*ad intra*) and her mission and responsibility to the world (*ad extra*). Hence, work on this constitution began shortly thereafter, with a young bishop from Poland, Karol Wojtyla, among the bishops assigned to draft this document. One can see this document’s fundamental theme of respect for the dignity and rights of each human person stamped on all of Blessed John Paul II’s social teaching as pope beginning in 1978.

To sum up, then, the concept of a “world church” as portrayed by the Second Vatican Council is a church that is truly catholic, truly universal, reaching out to include all people through the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, adapting the practice of the Catholic faith to their own cultural heritages. This Council expresses respect for all people and defends human life and human dignity, even of those who do not yet believe in Christ, indeed, even the dignity of those who consider themselves enemies of the church and of Christ. This “world church” has a special concern and love, a “preferential option,” for the poor and the afflicted, as Jesus did himself.

Distorted Visions of the “World Church”

However, there is an alternate vision of a “world church” that has been proposed as expressing the teaching of Vatican II, but actually is not based on the Council’s teaching. This vision is not just open and affirming of whatever is good and true in the cultures

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of the world, but is critical of anything European or Western, as being intrinsically paternalistic, colonial and oppressive, like a teenager rebelling against his or her white middle-class upbringing. They forget that being open to all cultures and peoples includes respect for one’s own cultural heritage and history.

One distorted version of the “world church” that became very popular in the years immediately following the council was that the Church should identify with the world, but not change or convert it. The teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, 15-17 concerning the possibility of the salvation of some of those outside the Catholic Church was interpreted, wrongly, into the assumption that many, if not all, non-Christians would be saved by virtue of the goodness and truth in their religions, and not by Jesus Christ. It is little wonder that many loyal Catholics rejected this false “universalism” which is really religious indifferentism: a view that “one religion is as good as another” or that there are many paths to salvation other than Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life”, the world’s only savior. In response to this, Pope Paul VI issued his great encyclical letter, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “On Evangelization in the Modern World” and later Pope John Paul II issued *Redemptoris Missio* (“The Mission of the Redeemer”), both of which underscore the belief that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the one savior of the world and the source of all saving grace.

Another extreme of the concept of a “world church” is limiting the church’s message and mission to concern for the poor and the oppressed, without the necessity of proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and neglecting the importance of his church-the church Jesus founded-to encounter him and be saved. The reduction of the church’s mission *solely*, to improving this world and caring for human need, especially of the poor and oppressed, was a hallmark of some types of liberation theology-especially those founded on Marxist principles, which are intrinsically and militantly atheistic. The church indeed has a mission to free captives, confront injustice and help the oppressed, but this cannot be separated from proclamation of Gospel of Jesus Christ and salvation through his grace. In 1985 the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops declared:

The salvific mission of the Church in relation to the world must be understood as an integral whole. Though it is spiritual, the mission of the Church involves human promotion even in its temporal aspects. For this reason the mission of the Church cannot be reduced to a monism, no matter how the latter is understood. In this mission there is certainly a clear distinction

– but not a separation – between the natural and the supernatural aspects. This duality is not a dualism. It is thus necessary to put aside the false and useless oppositions between, for example, the Church’s spiritual mission and *diaconia* for the world. (II D. 6.)

The “Church of the Little Flock”

Another approach to understanding Vatican II that I’d like to explore is “the church of the little flock”. In contrast, with the “world church”, this image explores the church as the people of God who may appear, at times, as small and sometimes persecuted minority. (This is, of course, how Christ’s church *began*.)

The image of the “little flock” comes from Jesus himself, who distinguished his followers from the “nations of the world” who are anxious about the things of the world – what they are to eat and drink. Not that these things are unimportant (indeed, food and drink are essential for life), but Jesus says “...your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom and these things shall be yours as well. *Fear not, little flock*, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:30-32). Jesus’ group of followers certainly appeared as a “little flock,” apparently out of step with those in the world around them who were seeking security, status, wealth, and other earthly things. The assurance “Fear not, little flock it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” certainly resonated in their hearts through their own experience.

The Second Vatican Council refers to this “little flock” at least twice in its central constitution – *Lumen Gentium*, the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.” In *LG*, 6 the Council speaks of the flock “whose sheep, although watched over by human shepherds, are nevertheless at all times led and brought to pasture by Christ himself, the Good Shepherd” (cf. Jn 10:11, 1 Pt 5:4). But the passage that is most striking is in *LG* 10. After the Council fathers describe the identifying attributes of the church of Jesus Christ, they comment:

...that Messianic people, although it does not actually include all people, and at times may appear as a small flock, is, however, a most sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race.

Established by Christ as a communion of life, love, and truth, it is taken up by him also as the instrument of the salvation of all; as the light of the world and the salt of the earth (cf. Mt 5:13-16), it is sent forth into the whole world. (*LG*, 10)

With the rise of secularization and irreligion, especially in the affluent Western world, the church indeed “may [and does] appear as a small flock.” Is the Catholic Church a “world church” – or is it a “little flock” – a remnant of true believers in an increasingly unbelieving world? These ideas do seem to be opposed, and sometimes they are. There are some Catholics who interpret Vatican II as seeking to preserve Catholic identity, even if it means appearing as a “small flock” – a faithful remnant in our society.

In fact, these are some ways in which I see myself in this way as a Catholic, and find this supported by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. My wife and I have raised a Catholic family, adhering to the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*, Part II, Chapter I on “Marriage and Family in the Modern World” which explains and

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defends the Church’s teaching on marriage lived in complete fidelity to one’s spouse without divorce, and open to life – rejecting abortion and artificial contraception. The statisticians tell us that we are part of a “little flock” – a minority – even among Catholics – even though we are just trying to adhere to what Vatican II teaches. Another example: my profession is teaching theology at a Catholic university and in teaching theology in full adherence and loyalty to the magisterium of the Catholic Church I am simply following what is prescribed in Vatican II’s document *Gravissimum Educationis*, the “Declaration on Christian Education,” and developed further by the Vatican document on Catholic universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesia*. And yet, as I look around I am told of other colleges and universities that call themselves Catholic in which theology professors publically disagree with the church’s *magisterium* in the name of “academic freedom” and whose institutions do not follow all the directives of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, and yet still insist that they are Catholic. It is not my place to judge other teachers or institutions, but I do understand what it is to be a faithful adherent of Vatican II and still feel like a member of the church of the “little flock”. I also am an advocate of what Vatican II teaches in *Lumen Gentium* and in the “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) about a rediscovery of and use of the charisms and the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the building up of the church and for evangelization. I teach in line with Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict (and I might add, with St. Francis of Assisi) that the church is charismatic in her very nature. However in following the teaching of Vatican II in this regard, I often sense I belong to the church of the “little flock”. Many Catholics don’t see any need for the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their use in their daily lives.

It is even seen as suspect in some circles to promote evangelization among Catholics-which is also rooted in the Council’s teaching and strongly promoted by our recent popes. Many Catholics still consider this an unusual vocation, for missionaries only, and those outside the church often are offended when you witness to Christ and seek to “impose your beliefs” upon them (Even when we only propose them and not impose them). Some recent theological teaching among Catholics insist that Catholics should not evangelize certain non-Christians, such as Jewish people. This is in clear contradiction of the teaching found in both *Nostra Aetate* (On the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions), *Dignitatis Humanae*, (On Religious Liberty), and *Ad Gentes* (On the Church’s Missionary Activity), as well as *Lumen Gentium*. To follow Vatican II faithfully means to experience what it means to be a minority part of the “church of the little flock”-even at times among Catholics, and much more often as Catholics strive to live the teaching of the

Second Vatican Council in secular and/or non-Christian contexts and environments.

It would be easy, then, for a Catholic trying to follow the council to retreat into a defensive posture, or even to seek to withdraw from the view of Catholicism as a “world church.” Some Catholics have chosen this direction, but I believe that is a mistake, not in keeping with the call of the Second Vatican Council for *engagement* with our culture for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. This mentality of a church separated from the world is often, in my experience, found in Catholics who do not accept liturgical changes approved by the church. That is, they reject the idea of a “world church” that approves of the liturgy celebrated in vernacular languages. I am not speaking about liturgical abuses, things not authorized by the church. Other Catholics reject ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, both which are strongly advocated by the Council. It is important to distinguish between those who are a “little flock” who are separated by *loyalty* to what the church herself teaches, from those who are a “little flock” because they cling to false or distorted conception of the Second Vatican Council and of Church teaching. This underscores the extreme importance of an effective education of all Catholics, especially adults, in the authentic meaning of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. This was strongly promoted by the Catholic bishops at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985.

To understand what I believe is the meaning “The Church of the Little Flock.” I would like to refer to the second chapter of a book by Karl Rahner, S.J., originally written in German in 1972, entitled in English “*The Shape of the Church to Come*.” Chapter two is called “Church of the Little Flock”:

“We are the beginning of the little flock. I say ‘the beginning’ because, without being really deeply disturbed in my faith, I am sure that in the next decades the German Church will decline quite considerably numerically, at least in relation to the total population and in social influence.

“But, when we speak of ourselves today as the beginning of the little flock, we must first remove a misunderstanding. ‘Little flock’ does not mean the same as ghetto or sect, since these are defined not by numbers but by a mentality: a mentality which the Church can afford in the future even less than today, no matter how large or small the numbers in the German Church may be or become. Where a sectarian or ghetto mentality is propagated among us – not of course under this label, but in fact – under the pretext that we are or are becoming Christ’s little flock which has to profess the folly of faith and of the cross, it must be fought with the utmost severity in the name of true faith and authentic Christianity. If we talk of the ‘little flock’ to defend our cosy traditionalism and stale pseudo-orthodoxy in fear of the mentality of modern man and modern society, if we tacitly consent to the departure of restless, questioning people from the Church so that we can return to our repose and orderly life and everything in the Church becomes as it was before, we are propagating, not the attitude proper to Christ’s little flock, but a petty sectarian mentality. This is all the more dangerous because it shows up, not under its true name, but in an appeal to orthodoxy, church-loyalty and strict morality.

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“The smaller Christ’s flock becomes in the pluralism of modern society, so much the less can it afford a mentality of the ghetto and the sect, so much more open must it be to the outer world, so much more precisely and boldly must it ask in every given case where the frontiers really lie between the Church and unbelieving world. They certainly do not lie where a diehard cosy traditionalism wants to place them in the most diverse areas of the Church.

“Assuming all this and taking it quite seriously, it must nevertheless be said that, by any human estimate, the Church in Germany will become numerically smaller, particularly by comparison with the total population. This prospect, which must be frankly and boldly recognized, does not refer merely to the number of ‘practicing’ Catholics who really take part in the life of the Church. However unpleasant it may be, we must also allow for the fact that social conditions in the long or short run may be so transformed (whatever the cause of this may be) that civic respectability and normality will no longer require a person to be baptized Christian... that it will soon be no longer socially out of place or damaging to withdraw officially from the Church... We are a little flock in society and we shall become a much smaller flock, since the erosion of the preconditions of a Christian society within the secular society still continues and thus takes away the ground more and more from a traditional Christianity.

“The real question resulting from this is more or less: What must the Church do in view of this situation and the foreseeable further development? Certainly there is no reason for a bigoted and pharisaic lamentation on the faithlessness of the world or for a desperate expectation that the last day will soon dawn... We must, however draw attention to a quite essential and fundamental consequence of this situation of the Church as a dwindling flock. The Church in her proclamation and in her life must insist on an aggressive attitude in all situations to win new Christians from an ‘unchristian’ milieu and not be content with merely defending her traditional substance... The possibility therefore of winning new Christians from a milieu that has become unchristian is the sole living and convincing evidence that even today Christianity still has a real chance for the future... It means more to win one new Christian from what we may call neopaganism than to keep ten ‘old Christians’. Even though it seems to aim at numerically slight results, even if at first perhaps it produces from these ‘neopagans’ only people who are interested in Christianity and the Church, the missionary offensive is the only method of defence which promises success in preserving the old remnant of the past Western Christianity. Only in this way can people even in the remnant get rid of the crippling feeling of belonging to a social group doomed to die out...

The real question resulting from this is more or less: What must the Church do in view of this situation and the foreseeable further development?


“The true point and importance of the principle which emerges from the present and future of the little flock, of an offensive attitude towards ‘neopaganism’ as distinct from one that is merely defensive, can be appreciated only when we coolly recognize that the missionary forces of the Church are in every way finite and very limited. If we don’t allow for this fact, the assertion of the principle of missionary strategy will only meet with the unctuous response: Yes, of course, we must do this and not omit that. But if we allow for the limitation of missionary forces and if we really want to achieve even a modest conquest by our offensive, the principle means that we must obviously give up, not all, but certainly a great deal of our defensive strategy...

“Here, however, is an example. If in the immediate future we want to choose a capable parish priest or bishop from a number of men, we ought not to ask so much whether the candidate has adapted himself very smoothly to the traditional machinery of the Church or whether he has done well what people expected of him in the light of the traditional behavior-patterns of office-holders in the Church; we ought to ask rather if he has ever succeeded in getting a hearing from the ‘neopagans’ and made at least one or two of these into Christians, but not merely by bringing them back to old familiar ways—which is often the result of merely psychological influences. The best missionary in a non-Catholic diaspora situation would be the best candidate for an office in the Church.”¹

Conclusion

Are we the “World Church” or “the Church of the Little Flock?” I think the answer from Vatican II is, that when they are properly understood, “both.”

The Catholic Church is the church which embraces the world and all its needs and concerns: the universal Church established by Jesus Christ for the life and salvation of all people. It can never again be an exclusively Western or Euro-centered church. Nor can she fail in her responsibility, following the mandate of Jesus, to make disciples of all nations—announcing the Gospel to all “Jew and Greek,” “slave and free.” This “world church” will embrace all and express in her worship, government and other practices the authentically good and human elements found among the broad range of Catholics throughout the world.

In terms of the response of the world to the teaching of Vatican II (i.e. the teaching of the Catholic Church) the church may often experience herself as the “Church of the Little Flock” – a minority – and sometimes a persecuted minority – particularly in increasingly unbelieving portions of the world and societies – including our own “post-Christian” society. And yet this “little flock” of the church is to be, as *Lumen Gentium* says, “a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race.” For this to happen, Catholics can’t afford to be bitter or defensive nor retreat into a sectarian ghetto (either liturgically, physically, or otherwise) to escape the world in which we live. We must let our light shine before all so that they may see our good works, and give glory to our Father in heaven (cf Mt 5:16). 

Notes:

1. Karl Rahner, S.J. *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1972), 29-33.

Marcello Zago, OMI: Bonding Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue

By Harry E. Winter, OMI

Archbishop Marcello Zago, OMI, died on March 1st, 2001, fourteen years after the first Assisi meeting of Oct. 27, 1986. He served as the right hand man of Blessed John Paul II in arranging the event.¹ For him, the Proclamation of Jesus as the only Savior was the overriding concern of Assisi. But he insisted also on the integrity of interreligious dialogue, being one of the modern founders of this discipline. In the process, he made valuable contributions to the dynamism of ecumenism. We will show that both academically and pastorally, his major was Missiology, with a double minor in Dialogue, and Ecumenism. His views seem especially timely today, when ecumenism is sometimes cut off from the energy of Proclamation, and the Dialogue with World Religions tends to absorb ecumenism.

Ecumenism is generally acknowledged to have three main roots: the missionary concern over the effect of divisiveness (Proclamation), the concern for shared doctrine (Faith and Order) and the concern for social justice (Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation).² Zago underlined the importance of the missionary concern for a healthy ecumenism, while insisting that interreligious dialogue enter into this framework.

Reflecting on the 1986 event, he stated:

Assisi has underlined both the convergences and the essential differences between Christian ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. The Christians prayed together first in the cathedral and then, during the common part of the program, in the presence of all the religious representatives. The kind of unity that already exists between Christians and that which they are still seeking is substantially different from that of the other believers. A conscious relationship to Christ affects prayer addressed to God – to whom all believers address themselves – and affects all mutual relationships. Christians are joined to each other, whereas other believers are ordained to the People of God. In my view, the following distinction made in two texts of *Lumen Gentium* needs to be pondered in depth: “The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honoured by the name Christian, but who do not however profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter” (LG 15). Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways (LG 16).³

Zago described many times the fact that the various Buddhist groups had not planned to pray together, until they discovered that the Christian Churches were going to pray together. He also stressed the formula that at Assisi, “we came together to pray, but we did not pray together.”⁴

Zago was born on Aug. 9, 1932, at Villorba, in northern Italy. He had completed two years of theology at the Treviso Major Seminary, when he decided to enter the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Ripalimosani, Italy, in 1955. He made his first vows on Sept. 29, 1956, and was assigned to the International (Roman) Scholasticate, taking classes at the University of St. Thomas (then known as the Angelicum). On May 22, 1959 he received his assignment for Laos, was ordained a priest on Sept. 13, 1959 and left for language studies in Southeast Asia. In 1961, he supervised Oblates doing their pastoral year, in Sriracha,

Thailand. After working as both a missionary and seminary director in Laos, Zago returned to Rome in 1966. While a staff member at the International Scholasticate, he received a Doctorate in Missiology at the Gregorian University (Jesuit) with a thesis on Buddhist funeral rites.⁵

Returning to Laos in 1971, he started and directed the Buddhist Office of the Laos-Cambodian Bishops Conference, until 1974. In that capacity he guided the visit of the Lao Buddhist Patriarch and his delegation which Pope Paul VI received at the Vatican in 1973. This visit broke ground in many ways, as a preparation for the 1986 Assisi event.⁶ That same year he was named a Consultor to the Secretariate for Non-Christians (now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue).

In 1974 Zago was teaching a course in Missiology at St. Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, in the Institute of Mission Studies, when the Oblate General Chapter elected him one of two Assistant Generals, a post he held until 1980. Bishop Jean-Pierre Urkia, Savannaklet, Laos, and the Federation of Asian Bishops chose him to be their expert (peritus) at the Synod on Evangelization (1974). From 1981-83, he was a full-time Professor of Missiology in both the Urban and Lateran Universities, and was serving as superior of the Italian Province’s Scholasticate at Vermicino, when he was named, in 1983, to the full time position as Secretary of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue. (In 1984, he was appointed Consultor to the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism, at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity).

Therefore from 1983-1986, Zago was the point person for developing the first Assisi event, and his council was the lead organization in the Vatican for organizing the event (in contrast to 2011, when the Council for Justice and Culture was the lead Vatican organization). When he was elected the eleventh superior general of the Oblates by the General Chapter on Sept. 13, 1986, he was told by Pope John Paul II to continue his full time work for Assisi. He subtly apologized to the Oblates and again brought up his ecumenical concern, in his letter to the Oblates of Dec., 1986:

You will have noticed that an Oblate presented to the Pope the 37 non-Christian delegations that had come from all over the world; that the same Oblate led the ten groups of different world religions to the prayer podium. That Oblate was your Superior General. Right from its very outset he had been involved in the organization of this historical event that has been described as the greatest significant step to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.⁷

Zago had two qualities which made his influence very widely felt. First was his ability to write in many languages constantly about his experiences with other religions. He penned over a thousand articles, with some being translations into major European

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Father Harry E. Winter, OMI, is an ecumenical theologian who serves as the district superior of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate ministering in South Dakota and Minnesota.

When he was elected the eleventh superior general of the Oblates by the General Chapter on Sept. 13, 1986, he was told by Pope John Paul II to continue his full time work for Assisi.

languages. He wrote much about seminary training, and was concerned about the distribution of clergy throughout the world.⁸

Second was his personality, a Romanita which featured a great awareness of the Anglo-Saxon mind too. His keynote speeches at the American Society of Missiology annual meeting, June 19, 1999, and US Catholic Jubilee Mission Congress, Sept. 28, 2000, were delivered in flawless, even colloquial English.⁹ Remember that the American Society of Missiology describes itself as “an inclusive and diverse professional association made up of members from Independent (Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc.), Conciliar and Roman Catholic communions of the Christian Church.” Thus one third of its leadership comes from the Evangelical Churches, one third from main line Protestant Churches, and one third from the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰

Zago undoubtedly met evangelicals, especially in Asia, and knew how to work with this increasingly important section of the ecumenical world. People of other religions were naturally attracted to him, and it worked both ways. Professor Mitchell concluded “Zago had gained a great deal of personal enrichment from, and respect for, Buddhism.”¹¹

One of the more modern emphases which bonds Proclamation, Ecumenism and World Religions is that we exchange needed gifts. Those who proclaim Christ as Savior are not so much bringing Him to their listeners, as uncovering Him already there and learning from those to whom they proclaim. With Non-Catholic Christians, we especially recognize the gifts their Churches have, which we need for a complete Catholicism, even as we bring our gifts to the table. We approach non-Christian Religions, especially Judaism, with a respect and openness. In each of the three situations, the friendships formed are a priceless gift. Zago freely acknowledged that being in the presence of fervent Buddhists as they prayed helped him discover the depths of his own Christian prayer.¹²

On March 28, 1998, Zago was appointed Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, formerly known as Propagation of the Faith. This Vatican office oversees all the mission territories of the Catholic Church, and as secretary, Zago was the second most important person in the office. He was also the first from a religious community to hold this office. His earlier writings received a certain approval from this appointment. His relationship with the Prefect of the Congregation, Cardinal Jozef Tomko, seems to have been excellent.¹³

His most interesting writing directly concerning ecumenism was a short study article in the review *Omnis Terra*, concerning the missionary dimension of the only encyclical on ecumenism,

John Paul II's *That All May Be One*. Zago began by observing that the title of the encyclical is taken from the famous missionary verse of Jesus' priestly prayer, “that all may be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jo. 17:21). Missionary ecumenists formed as Zago was, are quick to note if the second part of the verse, concerning the missionary dimension, is not used in ecumenical prayer services. The second part reminds us of the goal and dynamism of ecumenism: Proclamation. He stated “The unity of Christ's disciples is indicated as a condition for missionary effectiveness.”¹⁴

Zago simply observed that the encyclical does not discuss very much “one of the greatest problems in modern missionary activity,” and “a source of anxiety... for those involved in ecumenism.” Proselytism and the ecumenical indifference of some Christian groups “persists above all in traditionally Catholic areas, and... has increased in the last two decades.”¹⁵ The fundamentalism of some Christian Churches is a frustration both for ecumenists and missionaries.

Noting that the ecumenical movement started in the Churches of the Reformation “because of the demands of missionary activity,” Zago comments on this feature of the encyclical (#'s 8, 9, 10). Then he insists “in Catholicism ecumenical consciousness grew together with missionary consciousness,” and he proceeds to examine how the 1990 encyclical *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (Redemptoris Missio) is linked constantly with this encyclical on ecumenism. Here he underlines John Paul II's hope that the front against “Christian and para-Christian sects...sowing confusion” will be made ecumenically.¹⁶

Zago supervised the document which came in 1991 from both the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: *Dialogue and Proclamation*. This document anticipated in many ways John Paul II's missionary encyclical and was actually circulated before the encyclical.¹⁷ So his contribution in 1993 to the Orbis book, “Commentary on Redemptoris Missio” explains both the 1991 document, and the pope's encyclical.¹⁸ “Commentary” is probably the most easily accessible of his writings, which shows his great ability to synthesize and organize many themes and insights. Editor and former missionary William Burrows noted that Zago's article is “an authoritative commentary on it (the encyclical) by its behind-the-scenes drafter.”¹⁹ Zago constantly *integrated* ecumenism with proclamation and dialogue and other themes, but he explicitly prefers an Asian term from his many years of experience on that continent: “harmony.”²⁰

In 1998, a position paper he presented at the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “The Spirituality of Dialogue,” received much praise.²¹ With “Spiritual Ecumenism” assuming such importance today, Zago's position paper is remarkable for not speaking of Catholicism, but of Christianity (#'s 4.6 and 5 especially).

Zago's keynote presentation to the US Catholic Mission Congress 2000 was followed by a response from his good friend and colleague, Methodist missionary Dr. Gerard Anderson. It is significant that a Methodist reminded Catholics that only one

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Zago supervised the document which came in 1991 from both the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: Dialogue and Proclamation.

diocesan Catholic seminary in all the USA had followed John Paul II's request for a course incorporating Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue.²²

It is evident from Zago's extensive personal diary that, especially during the time preparing for the 1986 Assisi meeting, he could pick up the phone in the Vatican and have the World Council of Churches officials in Geneva immediately considering his request for advice and for Protestant participation. June 10, 1986, for example, he spent in Geneva.²³ For him, ecumenism was personal and deep, part of his "harmony" of bonding Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue. Each has its own discipline and integrity, each must be in good relations with the other two and each needs the other two in order to be healthy.

In 1987, Zago wrote an article for Oblates in the USA "Towards a Wider Ecumenism," which ended with a reflection on the 1986 Assisi meeting:

In some way the day in Assisi translated what the church is called to be according to Vatican Council II. It was the bond of unity among all Christians who prayed individually and together as one religion in the cathedral of San Ruffino, and later in presence of the believers of other religions in the upper basilica of St. Francis. It was also the leading and convoking force for all believers who prayed within the walls of the seraphic city, first in separate places and then in the basilica in the respectful presence of others. The pilgrimage of the various groups towards the upper basilica of St. Francis was the image of the road towards a common goal, a prelude to that peace which will bring the pilgrimage to an end in the attainment of the common goal.²⁴

For members of his missionary order, his pilgrimage here ended too quickly. But for Missionary Oblates of Mary, and for all Christians, and for all people of faith, both his life and writings are helping us attain the goal Zago worked for. May we too work for the harmony of Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue. 

Notes:

1. Professor Donald Mitchell wrote "He was one of the persons most responsible for the 1986 Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi." "In Memoriam: Archbishop Marcello Zago," *Monastic Dialogue Bulletin* 67 (October 2001)1. For Zago's own description of the event, see "Day of Prayer for Peace", *Bulletin du Secretariat pour les non-chrétiens*, 22 (Rome 1987): 145-55; also *Kerygma* 20 (Ottawa, 1987): 97-106.

2. Proclamation of Jesus as the only Savior, Missiology, Evangelization, and Witness are all the same reality, but with different emphases. For the relationship, see John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio)*, Dec. 7, 1980, especially #s 41, 44. Two other concerns have influenced ecumenism: the effort towards world peace, and the international Christian youth movement.

3. Marcello Zago, OMI, "Day of Prayer for Peace", *Kerygma* 21 (1987):105.
4. *Ibid.*, 99. The religions of India were also influenced to pray together. The prayer formula was carefully explained many times.
5. Marcello Zago, OMI, *Rites et ceremonies en milieu bouddhiste lao* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1972), #6 in the series of missionary documentation.
6. John Borelli, then of the US. Catholic Bishops Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, gave me in 1995 the vivid description Zago wrote of this: "Visit of the Lao Buddhist Patriarch to Rome and Some Places in Italy, 7-18 June 1973", *Bull. Sec. pro non christianis* 8(1973)90-101 (now called *Pro Dialogo*). See also Zago, "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in South-East Asia", *Buddhism and Christianity, Concilium* 116 (1979): 107-18 (eds Claude Geffre and Mariasusai Dhavamony, Crossroad/Seabury, NY).
7. Marcello Zago, OMI, "The Superior General's First Letter to the Oblates", *OMI Information* 240/86 (Dec. 1986):2.
8. See the Oblate French-English periodical *Vie Oblate Life* 62:3 (2003) for the bibliography, and many articles describing Zago's accomplishments: <http://www.omiworld.org>, click on *Vie Oblate Life*, search for 62/3 2003. A shorter bibliography is included in Harry Winter, "Marcello Zago (1932 -), Assisi and Interreligious Dialogue", *Oblate Missiologists*, 1997 pp. 43-50. You will have greater success simply putting the title *Oblate Missiologists* in your search engine, than using www.harrywinter.org/oblate%20missiologists.html.
9. Marcello Zago OMI, "Issues Shaping the Encounter of the Gospel with Other Religions in the New Millennium", *Missiology* 28 (Jan. 2000, #1): 5-18; Zago, "Global Integration of Catholic Missions in the United States Today", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25 (2001, April, #2):2-6.
10. <http://www.asmweb.org>.
11. Mitchell, "In Memoriam", *Monastic Dialogue Bulletin* 67:1.
12. Marcello Zago O.M.I., "The Missionary Importance of the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint", *Omnis Terra* #263 (Dec. 1995):488.
13. OMI, See Willi Henkel, OMI, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Legacy+of+Marcello+Zago,+O.M.I.-a0173923> 104.
14. Zago, "The Missionary Importance", p. 489.
15. *Ibid.*, citing John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity*, #50.
16. See especially #s 30, 36 and 50 for the integration of Ecumenism, Proclamation and Dialogue. Zago practically authored these paragraphs: Willi Henkel, O.M.I., "Archbishop Marcello Zago's Contribution to Missiology", *Vie Oblate Life* 62 (2003, #3):384-93.
17. Secretariate for Non Christian Religions, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991, see #4.
18. Marcello Zago O.M.I., "Commentary on Redemptoris Missio", pp. 56-90, in William R. Burrows, ed., *Redemption and Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); reissued in 2009 Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock.
19. Burrows, "Catholics, Carey's 'Means,' and Twenty-first-Century Mission", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34 (July, 2010, 3):138n.17.
20. Zago, "Commentary", *Redemption and Dialogue*, p. 61.
21. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "The Spirituality of Dialogue", *Pro Dialogo* 1999, pp. 233-47; also available in OMI DOCUMENTATION #240 (English), May 2001, 23 pp. The change of using Christian for Catholic began very noticeably in the 1991 document *Dialogue and Proclamation: #7* and has continued through the January 2011 document issued by the Vatican, the WCC and the World Evangelical Alliance, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct", *Ecumenical Trends* 41 (Jan. 2011):14/46-15/47.

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22. Gerald Anderson, "Response to Marcello Zago, O.M.I." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25 (Jan. 2001, 1):8. Anderson did find two signs of hope. First, the growing number of Catholic women in missiology and secondly another Oblate's "eloquent address to the International Association of Catholic Missiologists meeting in Rome in February 1999." Cardinal Francis George, O.M.I., "The Promotion of Missiological Studies in Seminaries", *Mission Studies* 16-2, #32 (1999):13-27.

23. Aloysius Kedl O.M.I. describes these diaries extensively: "Father Marcello Zago's Role in the Celebration of the 1986 Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi", *Vie Oblate Life* 65 (2006,1):30-32. Zago did work

extensively with Father Pierre Duprey (later bishop) of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

24. Marcello Zago, "Towards a Wider Ecumenism", *Mission/Unity* 26 (Dec. 1987) 2. This was the only one of the 45 issues of the USA Oblate ecumenical newsletter *Mission/Unity* to receive an "observation" from the Vatican. Zago had chosen the title, and Duprey wrote me (21 March 1989) reminding me that the Vatican and World Council of Churches wanted "ecumenism" to refer only to Christians. On p. 1, Zago explained how "a Buddhist monk, my friend," helped him during a day of meditation regarding peace.

ANTI-PLURALISM: INFLUENCE OF ST. AUGUSTINE AND ST. BONAVENTURE..., from page 6

40. D. Vincent Twomey S.V.D., *Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 157.

41. *Ibid.*, 158.

42. Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 7.

43. *Ibid.*, 8.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 16.

46. *Ibid.*, 17.

47. John L. Allen, *Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 235.

48. Joseph Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures," given in Hong Kong to the presidents of the Asian bishops' conferences and the chairmen of their doctrinal commissions during a March 2-5, 1993 meeting. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/ratzhong.htm>

49. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 29.

50. *Ibid.*, 30.

51. *Ibid.*

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