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Renewing the Church: Reflections on the Spirit and the Letter of the Second Vatican Council

Cover Page Footnote

Cardinal Daly, Archbishop Emeritus of Armagh, Ireland, delivered this Convocation Address when he accepted a Doctor of Humane Letters degree, honoris causa, from Sacred Heart University on May 15, 2000.

CAHAL BRENDAN CARDINAL DALY

*Renewing the Church:
Reflections on the Spirit and Letter
of the Second Vatican Council*

My dear members of the Sacred Heart University, I am privileged and honored to be part of this family.

This is not my first experience with Sacred Heart. The first was in the very harrowing context of Auschwitz, at a conference sponsored by the University's Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding. That was indeed an unforgettable moment. It began a relationship with Sacred Heart University which finds a kind of climax and a beginning of a new kind with this great and growing University. I was not quite aware of how well Sacred Heart was known in Ireland until I touched down at JFK Airport and heard the English captain announce a special welcome to ``the Sacred Heart. . . ." I thought he was going to say ``University," but instead he continued, ``the Sacred Heart of Mary Young Boxing Club in County Down." No wonder they call us the fighting Irish! We begin to teach them young!

Sacred Heart University does not often have its entire faculty turn out in ceremonial dress. And most impressive they are, and proud you as students must be of them. You are not quite an ``army terrible in battle array." Fortunately, it is not in that kind of array that they come before you, because if they did, it would be awkward and would create less than the kind of caring relationship between teachers and students that marks this University. A very happy kind of relationship, indeed, and I feel so privileged to come to a University which is still small enough to retain that sense of family, that sense of familiarity and informality which marks a true family, and also large enough to challenge its growing and talented students. It will not always stay as small as this – it will continue _____

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to grow, please God – but it will keep that spirit of family which so marks it now.

Boxing and Christianity might seem very far apart, but perhaps not. The early Christian writers spoke of Jesus as the athlete engaged in mortal combat with the evil one on the cross and emerging victorious. St. Paul also writes about boxing in the arena of life where the opponent is us, our negative self that is not yet fully blessed. We are engaged in a combat with our negative self in order to arrive as fully christened people who work for peace and justice, who may be able to say, "I live no longer my own life, but the life of Christ, who lives in me."

That might describe the ethos of Sacred Heart University. Not quite an army, but a crusade in search of truth and exploration into truth, not just truth talked, but truth lived and turned into life and behavior. A university strives to fulfill that untranslatable word of St. Paul: "doing the truth / living the truth in love." It is something like Christopher Prize's *Sleep of Prisoners*, when he writes about humanity taking "the longest stride of soul" – exploration into God. And that really is the exploration in which Sacred Heart University and this great Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding is engaged: exploration into God.

A great stride of soul was taken collectively by the Catholic Church worldwide in the Second Vatican Council. I was privileged to be at least marginally involved in that Council. Not a bishop at that time (I had to wait until 1967, a few years after the Council ended), but my episcopacy was, as far as I could ensure it, rooted in the spirit of that Council and that spirit of excitement which I felt as a theologian. It was for me a wonderful learning experience and journey into discovery of truth, which I had known already but which I rediscovered in a new way and with a new excitement.

How shall I describe to many of you who have been born since the Council – I must seem prehistoric to many of you – this real sense of excitement? How shall I try to convey the renaissance brought to the Church through the Council? The Church was renewed again through the experience of the Second Vatican Council. I would describe it as a paradigm shift: not a discovery of new truths, but a discovery of new ways of looking at the ancient truths and thereby seeing them as if for the first time, seeing them in a new light.

Unlike previous Councils in the Church, Pope John XXIII did not convene the Second Vatican Council to reform existing abuses. Of

course, there were abuses and always will be abuses. On the other hand, the Church is always in need of renewal. The partisan reformers called it ``*reformanda*," that is, the Church is always needing to be re-formed. Catholics prefer to say, ``*semper renovanda*," that is, the Church is always needing to be renewed. And I think that the difference of language is significant in that regard. The Second Vatican Council was a great renewal of the Church, not a change of doctrine, but rather new ways of looking, new ways of presenting doctrine.

A paradigm shift. One is familiar with that in science. The shift from Copernicus to Newton was not the result so much of new discoveries as of a new way of looking at the scientific knowledge already achieved. The progress between Newton and Einstein was partly due to new discoveries, but more significantly was the result of a new way of looking at existing scientific knowledge. In the same way, the Vatican Council was not new teaching, but a very profound and a very fruitful new way of looking at unchanging doctrine the Church feels it has inherited from Christ and the Apostles. One remembers perhaps the proverbial verse about the change from Newton to Einstein. The universe lay hid in night, and God said, ``Let Newton be, and there was light." But it wasn't so for long. The devil cried and said, ``Let Einstein be, restore the status quo."

A similar shift of insight marked the Second Vatican Council's paradigm shift within the Catholic Church, which had been preceded by a renewal of stricter study of the earlier liturgies and texts of the Church in the decades preceding the Council. To my great intellectual and spiritual enrichment, I was privileged to experience some of that scholarship in the year I spent in Paris, where many of the great architects and theologians of the Second Vatican Council and modern Church were already at work. Some of the great shifts of emphasis were already being tried out experimentally in worship, Dogmatics, and in study of the Fathers of the Church.

The work of the Council could be accurately characterized as a new balance in ways of looking at real and important doctrine. Additionally, the Second Vatican Council can be said to have reviewed again the whole dialectic of the Protestant Reformation, which introduced a new balance from certain Catholic points of view, and imbalance between the two poles around which Christian teaching revolves. As I see it, the Protestant Reformation was characterized by

an emphasis on scripture alone versus an emphasis on tradition alone, or an emphasis on faith alone versus grace alone. The great slogans of *sola scriptura*, *sola fides*, *sola gratia* might be said to characterize the great movement in Christian history which was the Protestant Reformation. But the Catholic Church does not hold to either/or propositions but more of a both/and approach, that is, both scripture and tradition, both revelation and reason, both faith and works, both grace and merits, both Christ and Church, and both Christ and Mary, although the last relationship is not on the same level. Similarly, the Church must have both a pope and bishops, and these must be kept intentionally in balance; one must not be subordinated or dismissed while concentrating on the other alone. That was broadly the dialectic of the Reformation and was broadly the dialectic of the Second Vatican Council. Much of its work was trying to find a new balance between these parallel trends, between these complementary aspects of one and the same revealed truths. It was to show that tradition and scripture are related to one another. Tradition is the reading of scripture, and the interpretation of what is scripture, as distinct from non-canonical writings of the early centuries. Tradition is the living Church discerning what is the revealed Word of God and how that revealed Word of God is to be read if it is to be authentically understood as inspired by the Holy Spirit. So we do not hold to scripture alone, as separated from tradition, but scripture as handed down within a living tradition, a living tradition inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Sola scriptura is a most important understanding that properly places the power of the Word of God as paramount. Scripture must be transmitted in fidelity to its original meaning. And that is the purpose of the Church: to faithfully transmit the revealed Word of God to lead us on our exploration into God. It is God's answer to our search, God's "yes" to our question and need. But that does not disqualify the important place of reason. Reason and nature are given to us by God. Nature, which we know and explore by reason, is also God revealing himself in his power, beauty, love, and wonder. So revelation and reason are both ways of reaching God which are not in contradiction to one another. This is also the message of faith and reason that Pope John Paul II has written about recently in his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*.

And *sola fides* must be balanced with good works, which are the fruit of faith. Without good works, faith can be a dead thing, a foreign thing, a purely vertical ascent. It must be a lived ascent, and it must show itself in works. Truth must be shown in love. Similarly, *sola gratie* must be qualified by merit. Merits are grace received and lived and witnessed to in the Word. We try to define a transcendental truth, which nevertheless is faithful to the one Truth, once revealed, as Christ the mediator from whom salvation comes. The one mediator between God and humankind: Jesus Christ, God and man, is the link between God and humanity which finds in him all reconciliation through his life, death, and resurrection. And the Church is the agent of that reconciliation, continuing that work and ministry of reconciliation to the end of time. Therefore, it is not Christ alone without the Church. It is Christ known in the Church, Christ's life lived in the Church, and the Holy Spirit working in the Church as our creed articulates: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church." These are not two separate items of faith. We believe in the Holy Spirit in the Catholic Church; we believe in the Catholic Church animated by, guided by, and taught by the Holy Spirit. So we are Christ *and* Church.

Additionally, we are a people who embrace Christ and Mary, not either Christ or Mary. However, Mary derives all of her significance and influence from Jesus Christ. All of her grace and beauty come from Jesus Christ alone. And her calling, as the tradition of icons in the Eastern Church attests, is that she is the one who brings Jesus into the world and who continues to point the way to Jesus. She is *theotokos* and *mediatrix* who invites us to come to the Lord who is mighty and who did great things for her and who will do great things for us, as well.

Finally, the pope and bishops are not separable from each other. Bishops of the Catholic Church must be in communion with the teaching of the Apostles and the successor of St. Peter. Therefore, the pope and bishops must work together collegially. That is why it is so regrettable that these days we have some bishops represented by the media as the loyal opposition to the papacy. Bishops and the pope must work together. A great strength of the Second Vatican Council was its reliance on collegiality between the bishops and the pope, which is necessary to cultivate the one communion of faith and one communion of love that Jesus desired.

Accordingly, in the days before the Council, there probably was an

over-emphasis on the importance of the hierarchy over the laity and on the hierarchic nature of the Church. Some of this was due to the so-called "Counter Reformation" response of the Church to the trauma of the Protestant Reformation. There was a tendency to overemphasize the neglected elements, as the Catholic Church saw them, as well as what we considered to be errors of the Reformation, and of the truths contained in the Catholic tradition. The Second Vatican Council encouraged a restoration of what we believed to be an imbalance and a rediscovery of a new balance between the healthy tensions that there are in the Catholic Church. Tensions can be creative. We would not be able to live safely in this building were it not for the complementary tensions which architects in their genius are able to build into a structure. It is a balance of tensions that reveals the totality of Catholic truth for us. Sometimes the tensions are severe and rifts occur. During the sixteenth century, Protestants went to an extreme and Catholics to the opposite extreme. Neither extreme reaction serves the truth well. In order to have a balance of truth, one must reassess, redistribute, and reevaluate those tensions, and bring them back to their full parity of value. An honest assessment and discernment process has immense ecumenical importance because the dialectic, the discussion within the Catholic Church today and the ecumenical movement, is not much different from the dialectic of the Protestant Reformation. And again, this process is often a rediscovery of truth and values which have been neglected.

The Second Vatican Council was a time of great excitement and a great sense of change. At the end of the Council, one felt that a new chapter was beginning, a new world was opening for the Church. I was proud and excited to be part of that new adventure. The journey was to be more turbulent than we had anticipated. Camps of conservatives and progressives began to form, although such terms are somewhat loose and vague in meaning. There are conservatives who refuse to accept the Council's decisions and who regard the Council as a step in the wrong direction for the Church. There are so called progressives whose agenda for reform goes far beyond, and sometimes against even, the clear mind and explicit word of the Council.

I often thought that some of the Council debates were too niggling in their concern for words, for phrases. But in fact, as time went on, it became clear how important it was – and is – to define words clearly

and to make sure that we use them in the sense in which Catholic tradition and Catholic faith approves. Some of those words and phrases have come to be used in ways that were never intended by the Vatican Council itself. Sometimes, indeed, the text of the Council came to be dismissed as unimportant when contrasted with the spirit of the Council, which was thought by some to have the only real significance. Some believe that the spirit of the Council is found in the texts of the Council and not in the present interpretation of them in the life of the Church. Those of us at the Council trusted God that we would be able to say what we meant and mean what we said, because it was not merely a human effort, but one inspired by the Holy Spirit through human means in human language. This faith and trust help to guarantee our basic fidelity to the truth of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So we try not to be Vatican II fundamentalists or to be anti-Vatican II fundamentalists, but to be true to the spirit and the letter, the letter and the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

I believe that the Catholic Church is moving out of a most difficult period of turbulence, and the diversity of interpretations of the Council are gradually finding a common core of understandings. Some would seem to begin with the document *The Church in the Modern World*, as if the meaning and message of the Council were to be found and based solely on what the world is telling us. The famous phrase, "It is the world that sets the agenda for the Church," is true in one sense. But what are we to say to that world? How are we to bring the message of Christ to that world? So we thought it most appropriate that alongside of God, the Church, and the modern world, we needed to express what we believe to be the source of its truth, namely, Divine Revelation. The constitution, *Dei Verbum*, the Word of God, is the most important document of the Vatican Council, because it grounds and expands our relationship with the world, God's creation.

The Church also describes itself as *lumen gentium*: the Church is a light to the world. The Church has a sense and vision of its own relationship to Christ the Word, and of its mission to the modern world, to which we must transmit the message of Christ. Progressives might over-stress the engagement of the Church and world, but neglect the interior light of the Church, which comes from God in Christ. Conservatives might be inclined to retreat into hierarchical transcendentalism or a world-less spirituality, a sanctuary found and

confined to clericalism. We must reject, as the Council rejected, both extremes.

In conclusion, I would like to recall a story about Pope John Paul II, who was actively involved in the work of the Council as a young archbishop. He was deeply involved, particularly in the work of the document the *Church in the Modern World* and the debates about it. It is the document from which he most frequently quotes. And he made it the basis of his ministry in his diocese of Krakow when he returned after the Council. I remember one moment in 1965, sitting beside the eminent theologian (and later Cardinal), Father Henri DeLubac, when a young and unknown Polish bishop, with a very unknown name, made an important contribution which pleased Father DeLubac greatly. He turned to me at the end of the discussion and said, "What a wonderful pope that young bishop would make." That was in 1965. The Church and many pilgrims of the truth came to see the wisdom of DeLubac's foresight.

John Paul II has integrated the insights of the Second Vatican Council as the inspiration for his pastoral ministry as pope. As a bishop who took part in that process, he is a pastor who feels the need to acquit himself of a debt. He writes: "These men took an active part for four years in the proceedings of the Council and in drafting its documents. At the same time, they derived great spiritual enrichment from it. They experienced a worldwide communal gathering of faith, which was to each of them a tremendous event of historic importance – an extraordinary event in the minds of all the bishops concerned. It was an exceptional and a deeply touching experience."

As one who played a very minor part on the edge of the Council, I too feel a need to acquit myself of a debt of gratitude, and I am honored that I was invited to share some of my reflections with you on this occasion when I received this great distinction of being made an honorary Doctor of this University.

Thank you very much.