

# Nostra Aetate: *What Difference Is It Making in North America?*

FRANS JOZEF VAN BEECK

## Preliminary: Introductory Question and Necessary Answer

Vatican II started with an impasse. Its preparatory committees had been out of touch with the Catholic Church at large.<sup>1</sup> Pope John XXIII saw it and responded with a typically Catholic move: he proposed that the reform of the Liturgy be the first business to start work on. Experience virtually all over the world has reconfirmed that the eucharistic Liturgy is the single most important source of the self-experience of the Roman Catholic Church, the very Body of Christ at worship in the Spirit. Hence both the global acceptance of the “New Liturgy” and the continuing frictions around it in some few places.

This book of essays celebrates *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church’s long-overdue farewell to habits of open hostility toward non-Christians, and its conversion, at Vatican II, to liberal encounter. “In our lifetime,” not only has our common humanity been propelling us in the direction of mutual understanding; even God’s Word in writing, revered by Jews and venerated by Muslims, has revealed affinities rarely if ever acknowledged by Catholics before. There is a problem, though. Open hostility to non-Christians is not really part of North American history, unless we wish to plead guilty to charges brought by Native American survivors, a topic left untouched by Vatican II. Why, then, focus on *Nostra Aetate*? This author has concluded that any sound theological answer to this question must wait a bit. So for now, let us focus on

*Nostra Aetate's* far more radical companion piece, *Dignitatis Humanae* (*Human Dignity*)—Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*.

This implies that my essay will be a finger-exercise in cultural-theological discernment.<sup>2</sup> So, let us ask a question that is both theologically and politically legitimate, as follows. Given that the Catholic Church's central teaching that God is present in the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ, who died and is risen, to what extent and how is the very successful secular culture of North America, in which we Catholics share, likely to empower us or hinder us in being Catholic Christians? Unsurprisingly (and *pace* most North American Protestants and ecumenists), any Catholic answer will have to be: much as North America has been the bringer of freedom of religion and conscience in the modern world, its constitutional principles and practices can only conditionally guarantee the freedoms necessary for fully responsible membership in the Catholic Church. Put differently, our culture cannot positively support (never mind join) the Catholic Church in its commitment, stated in *Nostra Aetate*, to end any open hostility to non-Christians and pursue paths of peace.<sup>3</sup>

### Freedom of Religion: A "Liberal" North American Victory?

In many ways, at Vatican II the notion of religious freedom was the North American import article *par excellence*. No wonder it met with stiff resistance among a vocal, largely Mediterranean minority at the Council, still accustomed to Justinian's implicit thesis, imposed by the imperial decree *Cunctos populos* in 380 A.D., that "error has no rights." Over time, it had been variously adopted by Orthodox Jews, Catholics, and Protestants; only the radical Reformers had proposed to give it up. Thus, was *Dignitatis Humanae* a clear North American victory? Its chief architect, John Courtney Murray, S.J. (1904-67), was well-satisfied with it, but greeted it not with fanfare but prophetic caution:

*The notion of development, not the notion of religious freedom, was the real sticking-point for many of those who opposed the Declaration even to the end.* The course of the development between the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) and *Dignitatis Humanae Personae* (1965) remains to be explained by theologians. But the Council formally sanctioned the validity of the development itself; and this was a doctrinal event of high importance for theological thought in many other areas. . . .

Inevitably, a second great argument will be set afoot now on *the theological meaning of Christian freedom*. The children of God, who receive this freedom as a gift from their Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit, assert it within the Church as well as within the world, always for the sake of the world and the Church. The issues are many: the dignity of the Christian, the foundations of Christian freedom, its object or content, its limits and their criterion, the measure of its responsible use, its relation to the legitimate reaches of authority and to the saving counsels of prudence, the perils that lurk in it, and the forms of corruption to which it is prone. All these issues must be considered in a spirit of sober and informed reflection.<sup>4</sup>

Murray realized, of course, that freedom from state-sponsored (or “established”) religion had been the climate of the Catholic Church’s development and growth in the Western hemisphere, and that it implied a secular universalism from which there was no retreating; the New World, and North America in particular, had been riding the wave of the future. Still, Murray was enough of a Catholic theologian to understand that two painfully inadequate theological—non-political issues—remained to be tackled. They can be summarized in two routine Catholic idioms: “the teaching of the Church” and “being a good Catholic.” Together, what do they come to? They express a key norm: “good Catholics” have duties to acknowledge, and the first is acceptance of “the teaching of the Church.” But since *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, the Church’s teaching is no longer as plump as a pincushion, for it involves, as

Murray well saw, the interpretation of “the development between the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965)”; even more ominously, “good Catholic” now raises “the theological meaning of Christian freedom,” to be affirmed “within the Church as well as within the world, always for the sake of the world and the Church.” A quick comparison helps clarify the sheer novelty of this.

### A Basic Example: Second-Century Christians

Let us go back to the second century, specifically the *Letter to Diognetus* (c. 130-200 A.D.). First off, it is not a normative statement on what human beings, Christians or non-Christians, should or should not do. Secondly, it states, descriptively, what actual, historic Christians made of themselves in a culture they recognized as alien. Thirdly, it states some of what Christians typically did—what difference they made in practice, and thus, in the eyes of others:

Christians are distinguished from the rest of people neither by country, nor by language, nor by customs. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they use some different form of speech, nor do they practice a peculiar way of life. For that matter, they do not possess anything elaborated by ingenious or intelligent people; nor are they masters of any human rule of life as some people are. They do not champion, like others, a human philosophy of life. Yet . . . they make no secret of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary nature of their citizenship. . . . Every foreign country is homeland to them, and every homeland is foreign. . . . They marry like everybody and beget children; but they do not expose their newly-born. The table they provide is common, but not the bed. They obey the established laws, and in their own lives they surpass the laws. They love all, and they are persecuted by all. They are off the beaten track, yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are filled with life. They

live in penury, yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they abound in all things. They are dishonored, yet in their very dishonor they are glorified. . . . Jews wage war on them as aliens, and Greeks take potshots at them, yet none of those who hate them can give reasons for their hostility. In a word, what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.<sup>5</sup>

The last line of the text, faintly Platonic, is the clincher. It goes back to a series of allusions in Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth (e.g., 2 Cor 6:9-10). Paul wrote them tongue-in-cheek, to make it clear to Christian communities that his own life as an apostle of Jesus Christ was unlikely to find any great acclaim in the world he was living in. The writer of the *Letter to Diognetus* agrees. He and his fellow Christians have made their peace with harassment. The Greco-Roman Empire and its elites liked to depict themselves as free, enlightened, and unprejudiced. The writer begs to differ: he and his associates do not feel at home, but then again, they do not expect to feel at home. Yet, there is no trace of criticism of, or exhortation to, the world. Unmistakable, too, are the mild references to what we would call "life issues": typically, Christians make a difference between table and bed, between welcoming children and doing away with them. They do not claim perfection, nor do they come with a forceful message; yet they do live as a body "incorporate." That is to say, they implicitly take seriously the Real Presence of God's Word in Jesus Christ—one of our kind, different in only one thing: he could not get himself to sin.

### **Taking the Culture Seriously: Early Christian Thinking**

This raises a question. Christians *acted* differently from the culture in which they lived. What did they *think* of it? Brilliant Origen (c. 182-251 A.D.), in the eyes of many the first great Christian theologian, mentor, and educator, is an early instance of the Christian approach.

Around 240 A.D., he wrote a letter to a young friend and former student, Gregory, later to be nicknamed Thaumaturgos—"the marvel-maker." Born in *c.* 210-13 A.D. in Neocaesarea in distant Pontus, where his family was a commanding presence, Gregory had ended up in Palestinian Caesarea—modern Haifa—for an education. (By contrast, Origen, born into a fiercely Christian family in the city of Alexandria in Egypt, had become a commanding absence at home; defying his metropolitan's explicit order to teach in his home city, he had traveled to Caesarea, where he accepted a teaching position and, a few years later, presbyteral ordination.) Under Origen's tutelage, Gregory became a Christian. In 237 A.D., he left to return to Neocaesarea, not without giving a mighty graduation address in praise of his mentor. A little later he also accepted ordination as a missionary bishop, to enable him to convert his home town and region to the Christian faith, a religion still apt to attract the Roman emperors' unfriendly attention.

Not long after his departure, Origen wrote Gregory a letter, to remind him of what he had been taught, and how and why:

But all I have ever desired for you is that you should apply your entire talent to being a Christian. Thus, in practical terms, I had the wish for you to take in the philosophy of the Greeks as well—anything that could shed light on being a Christian or serve as an introduction to it. This would include whatever matters from geometry and astronomy that might have a bearing on the interpretation of Sacred Scripture. The aim would be this. Whatever we know students in philosophical schools are learning in the way of geometry and music, grammar and rhetoric, and astronomy, all in the service of philosophy, we would do the same in regard to philosophy itself: lead you to being a Christian.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, what is striking to modern ears is the firmness with which the Christian spirit is already taking the measure both of itself and of the current best in Greco-Roman culture. The pursuit is philosophy—i.e., understanding and wisdom as well as

habits of eloquent persuasion to win the loyalties of city crowds as well as rural folk—all in the interest of civilized human life together, yet now in Christ. The larger cities, all of them centers of far-flung trade, were proud of their schools and of the famous teachers who had left their mark on them. The sons of landed elites everywhere in the empire had long been fascinated by them; the young bloods went out to learn what it takes to do their duty as respected local leaders, and as often as not, to sow their wild oats at a convenient distance from home, where they must spend their reputable careers. (The memory of his Roman years drove Jerome into lifelong learning, meddling, and exile.)

Christians were getting themselves emancipated pretty much along the same lines. Thus Justin (c. 100-165 A.D.), born in Samaria—the modern Nablus—traveled westward in search of true knowledge, and was won over in Asia Minor by Polycarp (c. 70-c. 155), who had known the Apostle John; from there, he went to Rome to start a school of “true philosophy.” We know some of what he taught from the three apologies in defense of the Christian faith come down to us. Eventually, he was made to pay for his move to imperial Rome with his life.

In fact, entire urban Christian communities had gathered this way. Bolting first from inhospitable Jewish Jerusalem, and after 70 A.D. from its ruins, they had settled, under Peter, in Antioch, where they were first nicknamed Christians (Acts 11:26); from Antioch, they had gone *in Urbem*—to Rome, the City *par excellence* of the empire.

Paul, the ever-traveling apostle, a Roman citizen by birth but a Jerusalem-trained Pharisee as well, was on his way there, too. But Paul had to be careful, as his letter to the Romans intimates. He wisely realized that he needed to offer arguments in defense of his apostolic mettle. He must reassure not just any full-blooded Jewish Roman Christians (who had reason to distrust him), but also such gentiles as had been Jewish proselytes before joining their fellow Jews in joining the Christian community in Rome.<sup>7</sup>

By settling in cities, the Christian communities also showed that they had what we would now call a global agenda.<sup>8</sup> They

figured they had news—they called it “the Good News”—for the whole world, physically. In this particular regard, they sounded very much like Jesus of Nazareth, whose teaching and individual lifestyle, open, mild, welcoming, and tough as they had been, had been nothing if not radical, eschatological, and encompassing. He had extended to all comers an offer of actual membership in God’s universal Kingship, to Israel first of all, but never without the universalist perspective so typical of Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism, both in and around Jerusalem and in the far-flung diaspora. Jesus, now known as the Christ, had “shown” that God’s kingship was here, barely around the corner, and he had enacted it in and around himself. No wonder Origen could call Jesus *autobasileia*: “the kingdom in person.”<sup>9</sup>

Oddly, a stylistic conclusion follows at once. From the start, Christians have spoken the language of self-involvement.<sup>10</sup> They were themselves part of their message, and thus, in their own eyes, of universal history. They were prophetic witnesses before they ever became historians, let alone (allegedly) objective historicists; like Jews (or, for that matter, all people of faith privileged enough to possess written sources), they represented a world that was as yet to come to perfection. Thus Christians always implied that they themselves were imperfect, together with their ever-unfinished world groaning for perfection, in their minds and at their hands. They typically have not pleaded their own consciences to justify their actions, nor have they often called themselves “right,” let alone “saved.”

A perfect world, they knew, had never properly existed; even Eden remained to be cultivated. Yet in its past and present forms it had always been both the home and the immemorial challenge to the multiple branches of a human family that was plainly broken. Most of humanity, they understood, was barbarian, unintelligible, and thus, at the very least potentially dangerous—i.e., there was little hope for just treatment at the hands of aliens. Justice lay in warfare. Besides, even on the assumption that barbarians were rational, it was plain that none were satisfied with the state they were in. One nation’s food was another nation’s poison—one had, it appeared, to live with that; in the last resort, there was no relief in

sight. Augustine summed up humanity's plight with the Stoic resignation of the wise: "Creatures endowed with reason [*rationalis creatura*] . . . are thus constituted: they are unable to be unto themselves the good by virtue of which they can become happy."<sup>11</sup>

What enabled Augustine to accept this? As a Christian, he had discovered that each and every bit of justice is gift, not performance. Human beings do not have it in them to make themselves perfectly happy. But God, endlessly giving, had definitively shown the Way to the End.

Besides, every kind of Jew (including the Christian kind) understood this from near-personal (or at least near-familial) historic experience. It stretched from Abraham-Isaac-and-Jacob-Israel on, from Moses and Joshua and David and Solomon (acknowledged sinners all of them) on, from the great captivity experience in the barbarian nations' sinful desert on (Ez 20, 35). All of it had everything to do with a Living God who could be trusted to guide as well as transform vulnerable humanity's great aspirations and near-predictable failures. Yet whatever "all of humanity" would turn out to be like, *all* of it could be expected to have in common one, and only one, prospect: death.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, so the Christians announced, humanity's definitive goal (and to that extent, its present course) had been decisively revised by one single human being, Jesus of Nazareth, both dead and alive. A Galilean Jew of obscure origin, accused of blasphemy by the Jewish religious authorities, and put to a criminal's death by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, just outside the city of Jerusalem, he was acknowledged (at least by Christians) to be now alive in what they knew was God's Holy Spirit, and thus, called Jesus Messiah (Gk. *Christos*) and worshiped as the Lord (Gk. *ho Kyrios*).

### Interlude: A Topic Sentence

The preceding explanations have prepared us for the topic sentence of this essay. Here it is: There is no such thing as an impartial Christian theology. Put differently, the Christian faith

is fundamentally a matter of preference or free choice. However, this implies that it can be practiced neither by mere compliance (that would reduce it to heteronomous subjection) nor by mere self-will (that would reduce it to autonomous, theocratic independence (or ditto counterdependence). For Christians, faith in God implies being privileged.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, it is a matter of theonomy—a divine favor thankfully accepted and endorsed, not a human accomplishment. Quite consistently with this, Christian doctrine ends with God’s promise of the transformation of the universe.

### Human Openness to Otherness: Some Telling Recent Events

When Hans-Georg Gadamer died in March of 2002, Pope John Paul II sent a telegram to the president of the German bishops’ conference in praise of Gadamer, whom he had once met at Castel Gandolfo, for his recovery of tradition as the source of sound judgment. In his masterpiece, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1961), ten years in the making, Gadamer had shown that the Enlightenment’s claim to objectivity in knowing (i.e., its professed hostility to prejudice) was in and of itself a huge prejudice—one, in fact, that obstructs the very process of understanding. Why? The key characteristic of human understanding is self-understanding, which occurs only by way of discovering whatever is “other.” Continuous with understanding there must obviously be freedom, but only freedom of the considerate, thoughtful kind will do. So Gadamer could explain the philosophic vocation he had discovered for the second half of his long life:

Not so much acknowledging one’s limitations in the presence of otherness, as reducing them by a few paces. What became important was this: being capable of being wrong. And where was otherness except everywhere? Who am I, and who are you?—the question is never answered, yet as a question it is its own answer; from then on, I made it my business to keep asking it.<sup>14</sup>

At the Liturgy just before the conclave that was to elect Pope John Paul II's successor, Joseph Ratzinger, the dean of the College of Cardinals, spoke as follows:

What storms of doctrine we have known in these last decades, what currents of ideology, how many fads of thought . . . The small boat of many Christians' consciousness has often been shaken by these waves—thrown from one extreme to another: from marxism to [*laissez faire*] liberalism verging on libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism, and so forth. New sectarian groups are born every day, and they illustrate what Saint Paul called the deceit caused by people, the cunning that will lead to error [cf. Eph 4, 14]. A clear faith based on the Church's Creed is regularly labelled fundamentalism. In the meantime, relativism, i.e., allowing oneself to be carried back and forth by whatever teaching blows in the wind, is made to look like the only attitude worthy of these modern days. A dictatorship of relativism that refuses to regard anything as definite is establishing itself; the only standard left is one's own ego and one's own needs.

These are harsh words, and the use of the term "relativism" is questionable for metaphysical reasons—isn't everything created by definition relative?<sup>15</sup> Still, the point of both thinkers—Gadamer, an agnostic with a deep flair for otherness of every kind; Ratzinger, a learned Bavarian cradle-Catholic priest-theologian—is near-identical. Both indicate that in order to have a functional human community we need more than scientific-technological ingenuity and social contracts coercing us to live rationally, i.e., by moral laws and civil duties. Why? Humanity's undeniable power needs ethical or at least legal foundations; yet the precondition for all actual constructive human conduct must be rooted in consideration of otherness, both infra-human and human. Without this native

openness—the soul of our “nobility from on high”—the life of ordinary human (self-)communication cannot be conceived.<sup>16</sup> This willing, unenforceable surrender of self depends on the Holy Spirit enabling human beings to respect each other.

Let us elaborate. Finite though we are, we are not the prisoners of finitude. That is, philosophically as well as theologically speaking, we cannot help acknowledging, natively, implicit in whatever positions we adopt, and *a fortiori* in professed religious positions, a reference to all of reality, and thus, in a radical sense, to God; not for nothing does crass sectarianism of any kind strike us as incompatible with mature humanity. Even the Enlightenment understood that.

This native human openness must never be taken for granted, for God is always to be worshiped in and above all, whatever religious commitments human beings live by. This gift of unconditioned openness, Christians say, is definitively incarnate in Jesus, the Christ unjustly executed, yet raised to Life for good. So, wherever the human openness to this gift is publicly treated as impractical or even prejudicial, what we get to see is the sin against the Holy Spirit (Mk 3:29 parr.)—the sin that can lead only to a culture of death (cf. 1 Jn 5:16c).

### Global Participation and the Tradition of Christian Faith

From the point of view of contemporary North American religious culture, we are now living in a man-made world of global participation. Participation-by-communication has slowly led us to a world in which the native human aspirations to *liberté, égalité, fraternité* have taken shape.

As ever, commerce and warfare—“coin and cannon”—have paved the way. We got humanely serious in the Middle Ages, by dint of dynamic commercial exploits by soloists like Marco Polo and allied cities like the Hanseatic League. We became burghers rather than serfs; we began to live by dint of deliberate exploration, by turns imaginative and forceful—the two never quite in the right proportion from the Christian or even moral point of view; the

Crusades, for example, ended up damaging us all. A process of relatively moderate transmigration and colonization followed. At the hands of Spaniards and Portuguese, expansionism turned imperial and Catholic. Justified as missionary, the Spanish *Conquista* turned into savagery, as evidenced by the slave trade and the systemic oppression of the poor by the rich. Eventually, proud Spaniards exported their *limpieza de sangre* as a claim to socio-religious superiority. Iberians ended up practicing the heartless, anti-clerical mercantilism of the Enlightenment spirit, which poisoned the now powerless imperial courts. This spelled the end of all habits of charity; the rule of raw practical law effectively took over. By this time, too, the Protestant Northwest European powers were defeating the Spanish and Portuguese colonists on the coasts and islands of Asia and America. Eventually, only Catholic Quebec was to remain—a monument to Catholic French expansionism (if, in due course, also to its Jansenism).

The eighteenth-century spirit of enterprise rode high; yet the blessings of the Western hemisphere were contested. Thus Charles Ronan can refer to “an influential group of Eurocentric savants,” who were

staunch advocates of their century’s doctrine of progress and belief that no development of consequence was possible outside the pale of European civilization. Hence, the picture these “degraders of America” drew of the New World and her inhabitants was most unflattering. Deeply antipathetic toward the theory of the “noble savage” and the “American mirage,” they embarked on a pseudo-philosophical conquest that gave the New World a very bad press.<sup>17</sup>

Still, in North America, the spirit of the Enlightenment won out. Atheism was as yet barely thinkable, being considered savage and immoral; but the new “useful” learning had the advantage of being theistic, at least in theory. A gradual cultural changeover from revealed (i.e., Christian) religion occurred; the new aegis became

“natural religion,” the intellectual perspective favored by Cartesian and Newtonian mechanics and metaphysics, and Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae*.<sup>18</sup>

This perspective, now roughly three centuries old, found itself fashioned in English-speaking North America, and has long spread to include Canada. It has perceptibly remained indebted to the seventeenth-century liberal-Protestant taste for principled tolerance of all types of religious doctrines and its professed indifference to establishments of religion. If anything struck Alexis de Tocqueville as remarkable after only sixty years of the United States of North America, it was the absence of anti-religious animus: the Founding Fathers of the United States had been visibly successful in devising a true republic, with plenty of room for varieties of (Christian) religion. In so doing, they had made something truly new, “under God.”<sup>19</sup>

What is more, in the early nineteenth century, North America was gaining respect in Europe to the point of fascination. It was especially admired in France, where, however, the revolutionary spirit was finding itself defeated by successive imperial monarchies; “Lafayette” became a household word. Yet from the 1832 Reform Act on, and with the support of a common language, England and Scotland were moving in the direction of representative democracy, allowing even Catholics to hold public office. Republican Poles, such as the professional freedom fighter Thaddeus Kosciusko, put themselves on the line for the cause of American freedom. And eventually, in 1859, after the skirmish at Harper’s Ferry, the Connecticut-born abolitionist John Brown was hanged and in short order canonized by the hymn:

John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,  
But his soul goes marching on.  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Two years later, Julia Howe needed less than a day to scrawl, “almost without looking at the paper,” the verses of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The United States had found its Manifest

Destiny—the virtually eschatological freedom destined for all humanity. Unsurprisingly, the new-found freedom could inspire a Catholic bishop like John Ireland to fervor of apocalyptic proportions.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church in Europe was finding itself in defensive disarray. It was confused enough to side with the *anciens régimes*, often under invocation of the new political myth of the Middle Ages as Catholic Europe's Golden Age under the papacy. One pope, Gregory XVI, embraced the anti-liberal view and rejected freedom of religion and conscience as “insanity” (*Mirari vos* [1831]); another one, much-plagued Pius IX, issued an encyclical (*Quanta cura* [1863]), followed by a checklist (“syllabus”) of eighty formulated doctrinal errors which he had personally condemned (DH 2890-2980).<sup>21</sup>

Papal Rome's most immediate concern, though, was a loss of freedom even more worrisome than enlightened rational modernity. Europe as a whole found itself peppered with a new, artistically very productive phenomenon: nationalism. Especially interesting is the fact that in two Catholic countries, nationalists appealed to the Resurrection to proclaim a religious-political agenda. The Italian *Risorgimento* was anti-clerical and anti-papal. Yet in Paris, in 1831, a band of Polish expatriates led by the deeply Catholic Bogdan Janski were writing a constitution for a reborn, unpartitioned Polish Republic, which some twelve years later led to the founding of a well-known religious community: the Congregation of the Resurrection.<sup>22</sup>

In any case, from the Western hemisphere's point of view, the time for distance from “old Europe” had come. In 1822, United States President James Monroe made it official: “The American continents by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European Power.” The Spanish-American War (1898) was to prove that it also applied to islands.

In Catholic Latin America, the Church remained theoretically beholden to Rome, but two centuries' worth of civil regime changes saw to it that improvisational adaptation to socio-political facts and

fortunes became a way of life. What helped was the fact that large numbers of priests and bishops were religious—more flexible than stationary diocesans. By contrast, across the Atlantic, Europe had fallen victim to two centuries of increasingly polarized and violent socio-political and religious-ecclesiastical turmoil, cresting in two World Wars.

It will never be known how many European Catholics were alienated from the Christian faith by Rome's short-sighted dogmatic propositions against all forms of modernity, but a realist like Pope Pius XI saw that the Catholic Church in Europe had effectively lost not only the enlightened rich and famous in Europe but also the unenlightened working-class poor. Accordingly, he called for Catholic Action.

What was still over the horizon was the realization that the Catholic Church in the new world had found itself tacitly caught within the Latin patriarchate of Rome. Not until Blessed Pope John XXIII decided that "Rome" was ailing from what was to be known as triumphalist stuffiness and called the second Vatican Council did this issue get the recognition it deserved, in documents on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), on the Oriental Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*), ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), and religious freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*).

The question for theologians is now: Exactly what (if any) elements of truly eschatological and universalist significance had remained at the first Vatican Council? Let us start with the least often mentioned.

### **A Call from the Sidelines: George Williams on Universalism**

Almost forty years ago, in 1970, Harvard professor George Williams, a student of the Radical Reformation, and a Unitarian (yet arguably crypto-Catholic) friend of then Cardinal-Archbishop Karol Józef Wojtyła of Cracow, argued that the first Vatican Council was effectively more interested in the pope's primacy of jurisdiction than in his infallibility in teaching Christian doctrine and conduct. And indeed, papal infallibility, defined with the highest precision,

never became a matter of significant theological consequence in the Catholic Church, despite attempts by later Catholic theologians such as Hans Küng and Luis Bermejo to regard it as a doctrine that was either offensive or superfluous.

By contrast, what Vatican I ended up asserting in the most exorbitant terms and on the narrowest scriptural basis was the pope's primacy of jurisdiction. Christ had bestowed upon Peter the power of the keys of the Kingdom (Mt 16:18) and charged Peter three times to be the supreme leader and shepherd of his entire flock (Jn 21:15-17).

In recent decades, many liberal Catholics have regarded this as Rome's worst failure to connect with modernity. George Williams saw the blessing underneath. Familiar as he was with the history of the Polish Brethren,<sup>23</sup> Williams recognized that on a wider, ecumenical and indeed eschatological perspective, nationalism, including Catholic nationalism, was the greater threat to Christian unity:

We all agree that the personal activity of Pope Paul, and of his successor one day, touches all of us in a key area. And at the same time we realize that whatever will happen without fracturing the Church into national entities, which is exactly what occurred in the sixteenth century, will be due to a large extent to the victory won over nationalism by the Fathers of 1870.

The spontaneous, even enthusiastic loyalty and the disinterested devotion which inspired the bishops of Vatican I in regard to the Pope were to enable Vatican II in its turn to recognize in all freedom the plurality of rites and juridical regulations without having to fear an intra-catholic nationalism, which was a true menace in Pius IX's day.<sup>24</sup>

No wonder Pope John XXIII signed off on the early documents of Vatican II as *Catholicae Ecclesiae Episcopus*—"Bishop of the Universal Church." Paul VI, admired by John Courtney Murray, followed his example.<sup>25</sup>

What may Pope Paul have had in mind? Minimally, it must have occurred to him that according to the Creed all things and all people remain to be judged in the light of a Justice so final that they cannot hope to know it from direct experience, let alone understand or accomplish it.<sup>26</sup> At best we can hope for it, mostly together, but also individually, in the light of “unanticipated experiences of God’s real presence.”<sup>27</sup> While we are in the world we live in, “this is the way it is.” Yet in the Spirit of Christ’s Resurrection we are worshipful because expectant, on probation as followers of Jesus Christ all our lives.

In this way, George Williams’s insight leads straight into a fully theological matter of great importance, *viz.*, the eschatological universalism implied in the catholic Creed and the natural universalism that undergirds it.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the object of this essay is nothing but an attempt to discover and recover the Great Tradition;<sup>29</sup> accordingly, we must attempt to practice what Vatican II recognized as a key and perennial vocation of the Catholic Church, *viz.*, “reading the signs of the times.”<sup>30</sup> After all, to those who, led by the Spirit, acknowledge God in Jesus Christ Risen, the world history they are part of is the very stuff of the unfinished history of salvation, to the everlasting glory of God.

### Being Catholic in North America Today

This raises the theological issue of the signs of the times with a vengeance. What might they be? Let us begin by not indulging in *Kulturpessimismus*, and think appreciatively and positively. After all, the Tradition has insisted that far from being identical with estrangement, alienation “has a positive prognosis.”<sup>31</sup>

North American culture is certainly not thematically anti-Christian, even in our own day. Besides, its record of achievement in the park of both technological and humanitarian enhancement of human life-together is so considerable as to be the envy of the globe—quite apart from any strengths or weaknesses of “capitalism” as a comprehensive socio-economic system. Equally clearly, its recognition of one God “from whom all blessings flow”—i.e., its

civil religion, based on humanity's natural religiosity—is a source of sound neighborliness and voluntarism. In Europe, Schleiermacher had pointed out that natural religiosity was self-authenticating, even though it could be found alive only in unity with elements of positive religion, which he still thought of as basically Christian. Interestingly, the parallel holds for the (neo-Protestant) civil religion in the United States and Canada: the freedom of conscience which lies at the root of civil religion is self-authenticating, and it is inseparable from culturally appreciated forms of participation in the community and its political organization, from generous philanthropy, and from neighborly decency.

This had consequences which at one point in modern history became near-indubitable “signs of the times.” In 1917, the United States took a stand at the portal of a new, global world. At the initiative of Woodrow Wilson, a liberal Presbyterian evangelizer, the lame League of Nations race-horse ventured out of its gate in Paris and Geneva, only to break its legs a few paces later, on the aggressive reluctance of European nationalism. But New York, symbol of the New World, was the scene of the next attempt, prompted by a visionary Universalist couple: Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt. Starting on December 10, 1948, when the United Nations General Assembly ratified and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United States and the principles of its Constitution entered the bloodstream of a worldwide movement toward global integration. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; they are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Both times, in acts of secular conversion, the Holy See, under Pope Pius XI, a mountain-climbing scholar of international renown, and Pius XII, a friend of pre-Nazi Germany and a Roman diplomat of high integrity, became active participants in the movement. And eventually, the campaign for universal human dignity and catholic civilization became nothing if not global, as John Paul II, penitent and forceful, proclaimed human rights wherever he went.

It is no exaggeration to say that the twentieth century witnessed the gradual loosening and loss of the affinity between Catholicity

and nationality in Mediterranean, Western, and even Central Europe. This phenomenon has eschatological potential. The Irish or the Poles are not quasi-naturally Catholic any more than the Swedes are Lutherans; the Moscow Patriarchate's nervous insistence on the removal of Latin Catholics and Baptists from Russia points in the same direction. The phenomenon is known in the New World, too; neither the Irish nor the Poles are now dutifully Catholic, and "Protestants" (especially of the militant political and sectarian kind) are no longer strangers to Latin America. At the same time we Catholics should recall Karl Rahner's observation that the Catholic Church is now empirically present in every country of the globe.<sup>32</sup> Clearly, concordats are a thing of the past. Equally clearly, an independent Vatican State is not.

All this is not to say that catholicity in North America never harbored any seeds of intellectual and emotional conflict. How so? Leaving aside the Maryland colony, North America has been, right from the start, a largely liberal-Christian revolutionary socio-political experiment, with freedom and human equality as its foundational principles, both of them fruits of Enlightened Neo-Protestant mercantilism, set forth by the great Max Weber. So far so good—i.e., a wonderful start! Again, alienation, understood as the defining human interest in otherness, has a positive prognosis!

### A Critical Question for Liberal Catholics

Yet this leaves a deeper, because more universal, question unasked. Can secular North America, and the United States in particular, continue as the world's pioneer of universal freedom, peace, and justice? Christians have a religious right (and perhaps even a patriotic duty) to hope or even expect so. Still, just how common is the common good? Not even the fairest constitutional order is competent to hold it out unconditionally. For one thing, each branch of North American (self-)government—legislative, executive, and judicial—settles matters of freedom, peace, and justice by free votes cast individually. Thus, in principle, a one-vote majority can settle (and has frequently settled) the law of the land.

In this context, on what terms can the Great Tradition of Catholic faith and doctrine find itself at peace and in broad enough sympathy with North American freedom of religion and conscience?

### Radical Universalism: Christ's Life, Death, and Resurrection

The answer has to be universalist. In practice it comes down to a common willingness to suffer. For only to the degree in which we North Americans, as bodies politic, find ourselves politically willing to suffer with and on behalf of the disadvantaged everywhere in the world will the United States and Canada be dedicated to participation in the growth and development of the whole world toward Final Justice—i.e., the messianic hope of Jews and Christians. The problem is that the United States and Canada, while enjoying the authority to compel their citizens as a matter of civil law, have as a matter of constitutional self-definition decided not to govern their citizens' consciences, and thus, their freely undertaken religious associations.

From a Catholic standpoint, this is as fair as it was for the man who wrote the *Letter to Diognetus*, and as loaded with consequence. Jewish and Christian worship, conduct, and teaching are unenforceable by civil law, but Jews, Catholics, and other Christians do have bodies of religious law to follow: "in their own lives they surpass the laws."<sup>33</sup> For the Great Tradition has a guiding idea, in the form of the call to *imitatio Christi*.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, Catholic Christianity at its truest, like Judaism at its truest, is committed to the portrayal of God's Creative Word in history. We both await and seek the transformation of the world as a whole, in a history of change that involves daily transformation of ourselves-in-community. Set on our way by God's immemorial promises to mythic "Adam and Eve" and fertile Noah and his boatload, embodied in Abraham's departure into the unknown, specified in the Exodus and the Law of Moses, in the fragile kingdoms of Saul, David, and Solomon, in Israel's Prophets, its Exile, its Second Temple and its Diaspora, and in Jesus' life, ministry, execution, and

Resurrection, Christians and Jews travel toward the Living God beyond each and all socio-political or cultural establishments—a galaxy of missionary witnesses picking up long-suffering associates as it travels (cf. Heb 11:1-12, 2).

Once again, being a Jew or a Christian amounts to more than ideal freedom of conscience or devotion to impressive past example: Judaism and Christianity are dynamically related shapes of the active hope for the Revelation of the Lord's Day—something not even the United States can fancy representing any more, at least not the way it could once seem to be able to.

### **Being Caught and Conflicted: The Catholic Experience**

Now it is not the first time that the Christian Church (or for that matter, Judaism) have gotten themselves caught between cultures. The fourth gospel and the other Johannine writings bristle with the theme, often under the Christological rubric of being “in the world” but not “of the world.” Every single Christian establishment, starting at least as early as the Constantinian one, has driven the Christian conscience into tight corners. Luther sought the safety of the Wartburg. Under Generalissimo Francisco Franco, numerous Spanish Catholics chose exile. Throughout the Communist era, the Russian Orthodox Church remained the Soviet Union's established church, only to be gagged, pinioned, and infiltrated by atheists and other rats. In the German nineteen-thirties and forties, Evangelical theologians such Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer found themselves pushed into prophetic exile or retirement—much as Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom had been in the fourth and fifth centuries in the Mediterranean. Unsurprisingly, we Catholics, being part of North American Christianity, have had our share of enemies in the past, but they were local and untypical. Know-Nothings are strangers in this part of the world.

Still, North America is not miraculously preserved from repeats of this kind of trouble; still, given our traditions of principled tolerance in matters of freedom of religion and individual

conscience, it is unlikely to happen. American citizens, self-consciously happy with the United States and its accomplishments as they are, do not make martyrs, certainly not at home. In fact, the shoe may be on the other foot: are we North American Catholics sufficiently discerning about the dubious, downright misleading aspects of the welcome shown to us here in the land of the free? Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic of Irish extraction and a tough-minded American author, was not so sure: "Unfortunately," she wrote, "the word Christian is no longer reliable. It has come to mean anybody with a golden heart."<sup>35</sup>

So the question becomes: are we Catholics now so acculturated to the American way that we fail to notice that it does not really encourage us to be Catholics beyond its own liberal-Protestant and happiness-seeking, financially upward-bound terms? Where is our growth in Christ, as the Mystical Body of Christ? Let us see.

### **The Open Church: How Are We Free, or, How Free Are We?**

Catholics, like everyone else, are at least partly the product of our culture. Thus, we do not usually worry about our use of means and tools; we arguably pay insufficient attention to ends and goals. Along with millions of others we are interested in arms, tools, and quick fixes—at great cost to world peace and to the poor, who depend on sound infrastructures. We do not trouble ourselves overmuch with the possibility that the profit motive and the American dream may well have desensitized us to global concerns typical of catholicity; could it be that both traditional American thankfulness for natural blessings and American generosity in sharing the wealth might require that we change our minds and alter our habits?

We prefer convenience to discipline; like most people in North America, we are in a hurry much of the time, and thus, inconsiderate instead of slowly, maturely discerning. Like most North Americans, we are (quite properly) reluctant to simply subject our minds to the (alleged) teaching of the Church, but we are reluctant to find out by common, open inquiry what our

obligations as responsible, democratic Catholics may be; we still count on clergy to tell us, even if we know they may be dead wrong, at least occasionally. Allowing for the lag of our Black and Hispanic fellow-Catholics, we have become loyal, successful, open-minded, fairly prosperous North American citizens. No wonder we are loath to deal with the obvious fact that when it comes to things Catholic, the media, from newspapers all the way to radio and television, show only a slight interest in understanding us as we wish to be understood, let alone in forgiving us.<sup>36</sup> After all, in the media, the constitutional right to freedom from establishments of religion is now made to shade into a right to freedom from all religion.

The key reason behind this is that the media are uninterested in the sacramental nature of the Catholic Church, a feature we leave implicit all too often. In typically Enlightenment fashion, our common culture acknowledges only one guide to life together, *viz.*, “the Law,” impartial by definition.<sup>37</sup> In principle, therefore, we Christians will advertise all we want, but the “one-body experience” (which we Catholics deeply associate with the corporate Christian faith made tangible in the Eucharist) has no public rights in North America any more than in second-century Greco-Roman culture. When North Americans say happily that “most Christians attend the church of their choice,” the reference is mainly to buildings owned and operated by a local Christian congregation remotely associated with other voluntary communities of more or less the same socio-religious flavor. Also, the common culture and its media cannot be counted on to defer to any supposedly higher (i.e., moral) authority. Politically, this may well be a blessing; theologically, this is a formidable gamble, for simply by being the Catholic Church, we open ourselves to the suspicion of hiding secrets, being corporately prejudiced, and moved by hidden agendas.

Add to this that United States Catholic bishops tend to be dependent on “Rome” and “Romans,” and it will look as if we Catholics are begging to be unmasked. We live in a culture that is constitutionally authorized to allow a deliberate investigation and misinformation industry to function, and to call this the fruit of freedom of conscience and self-expression. Put differently, in North

American culture, muckraking may not be a sign of good taste, but it is legal on account of “the public’s right to know.” As a result, in our prevailing secular culture, for Catholics to try to hide anything in the Church at all is apt to put the media on the scent, and to end up eliciting public exposés as painful as martyrdom—yet without being spiritually productive, as true martyrdom will invariably be. Is Jesus’ warning about the revelation of all that is kept secret (Mt 10:26-28 par. Lk 12:2-5) coming into a fresh relevance in our day? Like the writer of the *Letter to Diognetus*, do we not need and indeed want a Church that has nothing to hide?

Interestingly, the culture we are part of, tends to think that openness is all—at least theoretically. Well, let us Catholics join it, for eschatological reasons! Three blessings might follow. First, bishops might stop finding fault with “dissent,” for both dissent and its denunciation are grist for the media mill, at the expense of respect for the ordinary Catholic faithful.<sup>38</sup> Second, our bishops might stop sitting tight, hiding their apostolic authority behind the Pope’s any and every word, and drawing canonical judgments from it as if it were “the teaching of the Church.” Third, their hinting the existence of widespread dissent in the Catholic Church might cease; so would the insults offered to many Catholic laity, who clearly desire active participation in both Church and Ministry; and since motivated Catholics need more, not less care, especially of the collegial, shared kind, it might open the promise of a truly open church.<sup>39</sup> First intuited by a bright Catholic seminarian at the American College, Rome, in 1964, it was seriously started only in 1996, by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, under the title of the Common Ground Initiative.<sup>40</sup>

### A Suggestion: Following Christ in Today’s Culture

Ever since Justin Martyr’s *Apologies*, the Christian Church has professed to be, by divine grace, the fulfillment of all that is positive in the world. This must enable the Church to recognize and welcome, with discriminating love, Christ in the features of the great souls of all times, to admire their wisdom, let themselves be

freed by it, and even to adopt it. This would also help the Church return the favor, by accepting economic, social, political, as well as artistic and literary responsibility, and to make its appeal to all men and women of good will, in order to share its moral wisdom with society at large.<sup>41</sup>

Yet throughout, the Christian faith must incorporate an abiding determination to be different. What is the nature of this difference?

### Being Different: Aquinas's Implicit Challenge

Cultures shape us, mostly implicitly, but quite often by explicit judgments. The United States Constitution and its amendments attached over time, remains a fine example of an explicit, freedom-shaping document.<sup>42</sup> Yet its implicit judgments are much harder to bring to awareness; witness the loss of public consensus in regard to the existence of an unspecified "right to privacy," in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* (January 22, 1973). Ideologies lurk everywhere.

Here, Thomas Aquinas's teaching on the relationship between nature and grace comes to mind. He developed it in the interest of the encounter between Catholic faith and culture: the Church's witness to the world must integrate grace and nature. That is to say, it must freely combine its own specific profession of faith with the demonstration, by way of an appropriate apologetic, that its principles and practices are also naturally attractive, imbued with reason and good taste. Yet Christians do not live by laws of nature alone; "in their own lives they surpass the laws." For all his thirteenth-century reasonableness, Aquinas knew he was formulating an ideal he could not count on everywhere; he was writing his *Summa contra Gentiles* for young, bright Dominican missionaries training for service in North Africa, a place from which not all came away alive.

Analogously, numerous North American priests, pastoral associates, and parishioners join hands and rub shoulders with dozens of North American Catholics—young and old, married, unmarried, divorced, and widowed, poor, relatively well-off,

wealthy, and extremely wealthy, sinners all of them, yet generous, wise, and forgiving, to whom the words of the *Letter to Diognetus* justly apply. They are the true witnesses—quite a few pistics, many charismatics, many more mystics than we know.<sup>43</sup>

Why are the bishops so silent in their regard? Are they unimpressed by Christian laity, unless they are unproblematic “good Catholics”—members of the “church” as only bishops appear to know it? For that matter, why are the bishops so vocal in the laity’s regard around election time? Are the laity unable to make up their minds in elections? From what judgment seat came the bishop who said out loud in front of a large group of Catholic chaplains at state universities that he expected vowed religious and priests to be “at least ordinary good Catholics”? For that matter, from what judgment seat came the bishops who declared certain named Catholics to be denying “the teaching of the Catholic Church,” implying that they were public sinners? All Catholics are sinners, recognizably so, for quite a few sins—published and unpublished—are noticeable outside the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Yet from the beginning, and equally uncomfortably, lives explicitly aimed at the pursuit of holiness, too, have been an integral part of the *imitatio Christi*. Typically, these lives have taken place at a distance from local communities that have become excessively comfortable with life in the big city and their politically interested bishops. Yet if the best data are to be trusted, Athanasius wrote his *Life of Anthony* between 357 and 362 A.D.—the years just before he made his peace with the Antiochenes, which was to lead to the Church’s concord on the faith of Nicaea. Was he hinting that Anthony the Hermit in the desert was the personification of the life for God alone, for the benefit of the Church in the secular city?

In this context it would be irresponsible to pass over the life of Dorothy Day (1897-1980), a quintessential North American woman revolutionary, a journalist and seeker for justice and freedom for all, an activist decrying the material and spiritual poverty of the marginalized. She found herself drawn into the Catholic Church by prayer, and became a witness to the urban poor—underpaid, undervalued as human beings, tools in a

merciless production process in whose fruit they never get to share fairly. Her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, covers the first half of her life. Surrounded by stubbornly hard-headed men (from some of whom she learned), she describes a life of ever-questioning presence, embodied in the Catholic Worker Movement and the people in and behind it, shown in action in *Loaves and Fishes*. Without her, the Catholic Church at large here in North America would be harmless and effectively incomplete. Thank heaven, her beatification cause is in process.

### **Being Different: Is North American Ecumenism “Good Enough”?**

Yet we North American Christians are typically not forward-looking, let alone consistently eschatological. We are used to interpret Christ’s Resurrection in a largely exemplarist fashion, along the following lines.

Jesus lived a simple, exemplary, attractive life, yet “underneath it all,” he was a force for goodness on behalf of God, his Father, especially against the hypocritical Pharisees and scribes. Sometimes gentle, sometimes forceful, he was all along giving proof of the fact that he was right in everything he did; in some real sense “He was God.” He confirmed this by performing at least a number of “miracles”; he also uttered many memorable sayings reported in the New Testament—even if these reports are perhaps not in every case *historically* true. Still, at least one, viz., “John 3:16” sums it up: God has saved the world because he loves it. How? The main thing Jesus Christ did was this: he offered himself to be our substitute in God’s eyes; so he died the horrible death which an angry God had ready for us sinners. God raised him to life and so Jesus became our advocate with God. So the message (i.e., the “Good Word,” which all true Christians must help to “get out”) is: “Jesus Saves.” Professing Jesus Christ “at least for me” as the Savior means “salvation.” And salvation is victory (and victory is “not the most important thing; it is the only thing”). So each American Christian agrees that Jesus Christ is the “way to go, in my book.”

All Christians pretty much believe this. The problem is that innumerable Catholics tacitly find all of this “true enough.” So they will agree that ecumenism is naturally at home in North America. In other words, Christian faith in North America is apt to be a matter of a shared message, not a community. Unsurprisingly, the North American type of Christianity at its best is apt to be soulful, dynamic, effusive, tolerant, and ecumenical on easy terms, yet at a safe distance from “the Catholic thing.” Traditionally suspicious of “theological tradition,” North American Christianity will resist sober thought, and mistake intellectual integrity for “lack of faith.” Yet, being human, even North American Christianity will look for visibility and stability of image; this makes it vulnerable to dependence on surprisingly aggressive right-wing political means, belying its professed love of separation of church and state.<sup>44</sup> While hospitable, it has difficulty serving interests other than North American. Apparently spontaneous, it can harden into repetitiousness, and thus, into lack of understanding *vis-à-vis* whatever is *other*. But don’t we know that even trust in “experience” rather than firm teaching can turn implicit, and harden into dull moral monotony supported by tolerant cant?

By contrast, the Great Tradition, as Wilken puts it, “enters history.”<sup>45</sup> For Catholics, there is no sound reason to doubt either the faith or the integrity (or the entrepreneurial spirit) of Rev. Billy Graham and his many colleagues-evangelizers. Yet in the end, their appeal stops at individuals ready to turn their lives around and make their peace with their God now. Noble as it is, it stops short of the corporate hope held out by Christ Risen, notably in the Eucharist, the Living God’s pledge of Final Justice for all of humanity and the world. That is to say, Catholicity will enter not as a cultural message borrowed from the Scriptures, but as a call to actual Life Together, of which the Scriptures as a whole are both the product and the evidence.<sup>46</sup>

So, when all is said and done, participating in the Great Tradition of Catholic faith has very little in common with the “freedom of religion” as a central feature of North American culture; it shares only a thin slice with most typical Protestant

denominations. At the verbal level, North America as a freely-made socio-political artifact is undoubtedly a “Christian culture,” as the editors of *First Things* keep reminding us; but this is where the ecumenical consolation must yield to embarrassment. At its best, typical North American Protestantism, like many things made by human hearts and hands and minds, is a moderately well-established mixed blessing.

Why mixed? The religious freedom held by the typical North American kind of Christian can encourage the healthy secular freedom that allows citizens to live conscientiously while actively pursuing lives of holiness, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or religious-beyond-words. These blessings, held out in *Nostra Aetate*, Catholics have now joined North American Protestants to hold out to all believers. But that same freedom of religion, being man-made, is also capable of degeneracy. In that case, it will turn into the phony freedom endorsed by a mentality and a culture whose standard of human decency is convenience and sharp contrivance. Such freedom of opinion will encourage and make plausible a wide assortment of ways and means of falling short of deep human decency, all too well known, all too well glossed over, all too well excused by associated influential citizens and the media they control. In this way, in practice, and even in the guise of humaneness, the secularist view of life will be in control; the way of least resistance will win out over temperance and fortitude, law over justice and especially prudence. Religious convictions will be widely found charming but distrusted lest they should prove inconvenient in practice. Religious disagreements will be seen as proof of the need for further license. Religious defections and divisions will be appreciated as signs of sincerity.

This is where a problem arises for Catholic Christianity and Catholic theology. For as a matter of principle, any call to faith in Jesus Christ, while admirable, is theologically insufficient. It obscures the mystery (“sacrament”) of Jesus Christ’s Presence in the Holy Spirit. For, by the mercy of God, Christian faith is incorporate. Being in Christ is being part of an actual, imperfect community, a visible communal presence in secular society,

worshiping, living, and learning in the Spirit of Christ Risen. It is already at work, as a leavening agent in and for the world as a whole, transforming it. Jesus Christ is a very good idea indeed, and God bless all who call upon his name; yet Christian faith is faith together, in Christ's "Body." In Wilken's words, it is "a society or city, whose inner discipline and practices, rituals and creeds, and institutions and traditions are the setting for Christian thinking." If God is God of all at the expense of none, then there is no Christian faith without an actual life with living, imperfect brothers and sisters, ready to forgive and be forgiven.

The Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 12:2-3) expresses this by encouraging—the point of the whole letter—the Christian community. We are to go on looking to (*aphorountes*) Christ as the "trailblazer" (*archgon*) and "consummate runner" (*teleits*) of our faith race. And we are to do so together. First of all, we are not alone; "a galaxy of witnesses" in Israel's long history of endurance surrounds us and spurs us on. Secondly, we are to free ourselves from the cloying burden of sin that keeps slowing us down. Thirdly, this course is not for children, except God's and in companionship with others who have suffered. Fourthly, look at how the Son let himself be treated by sinners!

### Epilogue: Paul's Radical Call to Eschatological Faith

Before we conclude this essay, we do well to reread one of the earliest radical Christian writings, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul knows how to use the stylistic figure known as *hyperbole* ("piling it on") to make his point. If his Corinthians, unable to settle everyday issues (*bitika*) among themselves, take each other to pagan courts, how can they think of themselves as perfect in Christ? Does not the anticipation of Jesus Christ's coming in glory put literally everything in perspective? If judgment on the world is God's, and God's alone, then (so Paul suggests) you are excluding yourselves from any association with God by keeping on judging and blaming others, including even the "angels" (i.e., the invisible powers in creation).

This enables Paul to put the issue of cultural compromise as starkly as possible:

Don't you know that the holy ones are to sit in judgment on the universe? And if God means to have you sit in judgment on the universe, are you unequal to handling the most trivial cases? Don't you know that we will sit in judgment on the angelic powers, never mind everyday issues? So if you have your differences on everyday issues, will you really settle for judges who have no standing whatever in the community? I say, shame on you! So there is really no one wise enough among you to fairly settle a conflict between brothers or sisters?

“The holy ones sit in judgment on the universe.” Paul’s point is that despite his making himself available as God (Phil 2:6), Jesus Christ let himself be defeated by both human justice and cosmic courses of events, so as to become in person the saving grace of the universe. He carried off his Father’s healing work by not availing himself of the powers that be (cf. Mt 26:53-54; Jn 3:17; 18:36), let alone by victimizing anybody (Lk 23:41c). No wonder Jesus tells us, “Make a point of not judging” (Mt 7:1 parr.; cf. 1 Cor 4:1-16).

We Catholics are to find life in the Body of Christ, and only in that taxing context, by canon law, which must never be taken for the primary vehicle of pastoral care. That would be a departure from Christian freedom. But far more important, as long as we Catholic Christians take any others to civil courts, we are forcing our brothers and sisters to live, as a matter of routine, by the ever-imperfect justice of our mixed culture, justified (but by what standards?) by rationality of the socio-political kind. Accordingly, we repeat the mistake of mythical Adam and Eve: we agree to sit in judgment on each other and on ourselves. What a way to be free!

Today, in North America, if we wish to commit to a firmly Catholic Church, we must attempt what the Great Tradition has attempted from the beginning. It begins with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus we are to be an unequivocally eschatological

community—a matter, not of virtual claims to sinlessness, but of unconditional hope for Final Justice. Put differently, the Church Catholic we profess in the Creed is not a passable interim arrangement for good Catholics prepared to hold enforced truths and obey rational rules—the kind of folk whom young T.S. Eliot, inspired, no doubt, by Ezekiel 37, had in mind when he wrote

But our lot crawls between dry ribs  
To keep our metaphysics warm.<sup>47</sup>

#### Notes

1. Xavier Rynne [Francis X. Murphy], *Vatican Council II: An Authoritative One-Volume Version of the Four Historic Books* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1968), 23–56.

2. See Frans Jozef van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology* (henceforth *GE*), vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), §§9–11; §14, 2.

3. Much as the United States President spoke like a true American when he accused the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, of “hijacking a great religion.”

4. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press and Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 673–74 (italics added).

5. *The Epistle to Diognetus*, V, 1–4. 6–7. 10 (*SC* 33, pp. 62–65; italics added).

6. Both the address and Origen’s letter are in *Sources chrétiennes*, 148.

7. See Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 16–78.

8. See Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); and Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

9. Origen, *Comm. in Mt.*, 14, 7; *MG* 13, 1197.

10. Amos Wilder’s *Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) is dead right in pointing out the freshness of New Testament language use, sign of a new start in capacity for life experience. See also Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963).

11. *Ep.* 140 (*Liber de gratia Novi Testamenti ad Honoratum*) XXIII, 56 (CSEL 44, p. 202; PL 33, 561).

12. All those living in the early Jewish-Christian tradition would easily have intuited the twentieth-century anthropologists' thesis: evidence of *intentional burial* is evidence of "civilized humanity."

13. See Frans Jozef van Beeck, "One God: And Other Revelations": *Commonweal* 123 (1996): 15–19.

14. "Am Anderm die eigenen Grenzen nicht so sehr zu erkennen als ein Paar Schritte weit zu überwinden. Was es galt, war, Unrecht haben zu können. Und was war nicht überall das Andere? Wer bin ich, und wer bist du?—daß diese Frage sich nie beantwortet und doch als Frage ihre eigene Antwort ist, das war es was ich fortan zu bewältigen suchte." (Note. I have irretrievably mislaid my reference to this passage.)

15. Many European Catholics would recognize the *facts* enumerated here, yet question the *diagnosis* "dictatorship of relativism." In my judgment, "deep communal desolation" might be an alternative description of the symptoms in Catholic Europe today; if my judgment should fit, other diagnoses and remedies might be appropriate.

16. "*memn memoits an then eugeneias*": Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* XXVII (= *Or. theol.* I), 7, 16–17 (SC 250, pp. 88–89; PG 36, 20C [49–50]); see esp. *GE*, vol.II/1, §95.

17. Charles E. Ronan, *Juan Ignacio Molina: The World's Window on Chile* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 143. Ronan refers to the work of Gilbert Chinard for this quotation, but his entire sixth chapter ("America's Detractors and American Myths," 143–63) is an eloquent account of eighteenth-century Eurocentrism.

18. See E.J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

19. As individuals, the Founding Fathers considered Christianity morally unnecessary. Free citizens, they theorized, could be trusted to live by individual conscience.

20. See Thomas E. Wangler, "The Birth of Americanism: 'Westward the Apocalyptic Candlestick,'" *The Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1972): 415–36.

21. Oddly, error nr. 80 read: "The Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself with progress, liberalism, and contemporary culture, and befriend them" (DH 2980).

22. See Frans Jozef van Beeck, "Christ's Resurrection and the Vowed Life," in *Jubilee: A Commemorative Meditation Presented by the U.S.A.*

*Province of the Congregation of the Resurrection in Joyful Observance of its Sesquicentennial* (Chicago, 1987), 25–38.

23. Needless to say, sixteenth-century Catholics and Protestants were united in warfare against anti-Trinitarians. Its first victim was Spanish: Michael Servet (Servetus) (1511–53), was a Catholic theologian critical of the doctrine of the Trinity and a physician who had early intuitions about the circulation of the blood in the cardiac-pulmonary system. Pursued by the Inquisition, he went to Geneva looking for safety. Calvin wanted him beheaded; the city council wanted him burned at the stake. The latter prevailed. As Servet was dying, the crowd heard him praying an implicitly Arian profession of faith: “O Jesus, Son of the eternal God, have pity on me.” The anti-Trinitarian cause, picked up in Italy by Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604), was later taken to faraway Poland. These Antitrinitarians (known as the Polish Brethren, Arians, or Socinians) settled near the city of Kielce around 1562, and made a point of keeping themselves out of the doctrinal debates of the various Protestant churches looking for a doctrinal consensus. Their purposes were oddly comparable to those of contemporary Jesuits in the region, being mainly intellectual and educational. Not till the year 1658 did they find themselves expelled from Poland, at last branded as Arians.

24. George Hunston Williams, “Omnium christianorum pastor et doctor: Vatican I et l’Angleterre victorienne,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 96 (1974): 113–46, 337–65; quotation at p. 365: “Nous sommes d’accord pour reconnaître que l’action du Pape Paul seul et de celui qui lui succèdera un jour nous concerne tous dans le domaine le plus central. Et en même temps nous nous rendons compte que ce qui se passera sans fragmenter l’Église en entités nationales, comme ce fut le cas au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, on le devra dans une large mesure à la victoire remportée sur le nationalisme par les Pères du Concile en 1870. Le loyalisme spontané et même ouvertement enthousiaste ainsi que le dévouement désintéressé qui inspira si constamment les évêques de Vatican I à l’égard du Pape firent qu’à son tour Vatican II pu en pleine liberté reconnaître la pluralité des rites et des formes juridiques sans plus avoir à redouter un nationalisme intra-catholique qui menaçait à l’époque de Pie IX. Cependant les mêmes forces sont toujours à l’œuvre et disposent d’instruments de plus en plus puissants. Fasse le Ciel que grâce à la fidélité comme au zèle prophétique des catholiques, un Pape du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle soit effectivement «omnium christianorum pastor et doctor». — Years before, in 1970, in a thoughtful article in *America* magazine titled “Loyalty and Dissent: Perspectives from

History,” Williams had elaborated the high *theological* significance of a properly unified Roman Catholic Church, both toward a global ecumenism and as a way to global, civilized peace.

25. John Courtney Murray thought highly of Pope Paul VI’s support of *Dignitatis Humanae*. He concluded the essay quoted above (note 1): “The issue of religious freedom was in itself minor. But Pope Paul VI was looking deep and far when he called the Declaration on Religious Freedom ‘one of the major texts of the Council.’ ”

26. See Frans Jozef van Beeck, “What Can We Hope For, Really? Towards a Theological Anthropology of Hope,” *Gregorianum* 80 (1999): 489–524.

27. See Frans Jozef van Beeck, “Unanticipated Inner Experiences: Three Cases and a Reflection on Discernment,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 19 (2003): 7–23.

28. See van Beeck, *GE*, vol. Two/1, §59.

29. See van Beeck, *GE*, vol I, §4.

30. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 4.

31. On this theme, see van Beeck, *GE* vol. II/3, §122, 1, e, [f].

32. See Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 716–27.

33. So, presumably, have those participating in all kinds of non-Christian “religions.” The difference is that in North America such laws have no standing in civil courts, nor do attempts on the part of religious authorities to enforce them.

34. This invites an explanation. Residual Christians like John Toland, the Cambridge Platonists, the German Neologians, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel have shown themselves inspired by Jesus’ example of deep humanity. So have great souls like Mahatma Gandhi, Dag Hammarskjöld, and many modern agnostics. This is fine from the Catholic point of view. After all, Jesus Christ preached misguidedly is better than not preached at all (see Phil 1:18).

35. Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 192.

36. In North America, we are free to broadcast what we wish to say. Madison Avenue knows only line: “Try it, you’ll like it.” But once you “buy” the message, you are on your own, unless you can show in a court of law that you have been purposely misled. American Protestantism is mainly *message*, not *community*. Nice Catholics may tell a priest after Mass, “Father, I liked your message,” but the sentiment is not Catholic.

37. This raises the issue of the apparent pride of place of Canon Law in the Catholic Churches of North America.

38. Elsewhere, I have elaborated this in the case of the encyclical *Humanae vitae*; see *GE*, vol. Two/4b, §§170, 172.

39. See van Beeck, *GE* vol. I, §54, 4, and also my *Catholic Identity after Vatican II: Three Types of Faith in the One Church* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 39.

40. Michael Novak, *The Open Church: Vatican II, Act II* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

41. Twenty years ago, the American bishops gave us illuminating samples of this by their letters on War and Peace and on Economic Justice for All—documents unnecessarily politicized (mainly in the media, of course) by socio-political niggings by Catholics on the so-called left and right, and in the end turned to the great and unfortunate gains of the Republican Party and its well-trumpeted “message” of righteousness.

42. See Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 716–27.

43. See van Beeck, *Catholic Identity after Vatican II*.

44. Were there ever times when the CIA embraced Evangelical Protestantism in Latin America?

45. Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xv.

46. In the nineteen-thirties, a time of acute crisis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer concluded that *communio* was essential if Christ’s purposely peaceful Church was ever to succeed in not becoming a mere function of political expediency, held hostage by public culture and state; see his book, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954). See also Frans Jozef van Beeck, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969); translated into English as *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

47. T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).