



# The Legacy of Vatican II Renewal or Decomposition?

by Michael Davies

**T**here can be no doubt that the Second Vatican Council has been followed by the worst crisis in the Church's history since the fourth-century Arian heresy, which denied Our Lord's divinity and against which heroic St. Athanasius led the Catholic resistance. The heresy had become so widespread that in about 358 St. Jerome gave vent to his famous *cri de coeur*: "The whole world groaned and was amazed to find itself Arian." His dismay was hardly surprising when we recall that Athanasius was in exile, a compromised Pope occupied the Chair of Peter, and hardly a bishop throughout the Empire possessed the courage to stand up for the true faith. That faith was, as Cardinal Newman explained, upheld by laymen, inspired by Athanasius, who held fast to what their bishops had taught them – even though those same bishops had by then either abandoned it or lacked the courage to profess it.

Can a comparison between the disastrous state of the Church during the Arian crisis and the thirty-five years following the Second Vatican Council be justified? Where the Western or First World is concerned it most certainly can, and in this essay that is my only concern. In Asia and Africa the situation is very different, particularly with regard to the question of vocations, but the state of the Church in these continents is by no means as healthy as it appears to be if, for example, one examines the commit-

ment to celibacy among the African clergy or the reasons that motivate so many young men in India to enter seminaries – but this is a matter for another time. Cardinal Daneels of Brussels, in an interview given in England in May 2000, warned that the Church in Europe is facing extinction.<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, stated bluntly in January 2000: "The dechristianization of Europe is a reality."<sup>2</sup> At the Synod of European Bishops in October 1999, Archbishop Fernando Sebastián Aguilar of Pamplona gave the following gloomy but realistic assessment of Spanish Catholicism:

For 40 or 50 years, Spanish society has moved far away from the Church and the explicit acknowledgment of the treasures of the Kingdom of God. Cultural and spiritual secularization has affected many members of the Church. The result of this has been the weakening of the faith and divine revelation, the theoretical and practical questioning of Christian moral teaching, the massive abandonment of attending Sunday Mass, the non-acceptance of the Magisterium of the Church in those points that do not coincide with the trends of the dominant culture. The cultural convictions on which social life is based are undermined and are more atheistic than Christian.

Is there any country in the Western world where this is not the case? And yet, incredible as it may seem, there are those in the Church – the bishops especially – who claim that we are undergoing a renewal rather than a crisis. Pope

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John Paul II himself refers incessantly to the abundant good fruits that he claims have been produced by the Council. The question of whether the Council has been followed by a fruitful renewal or a disastrous decline can be answered only by examining the relevant statistics. It is a question of fact, not of doctrine. It does not involve loyalty or disloyalty to the Holy Father, and facts remain facts irrespective of whether one is liberal, conservative, or traditionalist.

Where the First World is concerned, it is indisputable that the period following the Second Vatican Council has been disastrous for the Church and has produced no good fruits. Before the opening of his Council in 1962 Pope John XXIII had been most displeased when members of the curia failed to share his optimism concerning the good fruits that he was certain that Vatican II would bring to the Church. In his opening speech to the Council Pope John used stern words toward those whom he designated as “prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster.” He portrayed his Council as a new dawn for the Church, rising, he claimed, like daybreak, “a forerunner of most splendid light.” But in 1968, three years after the close of the Council, Pope Paul VI lamented in public the fact that the Church was engaged in a process of self-destruction (*autodistruzione*).<sup>3</sup> In 1972, on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, he attributed this process to the fact that “by means of some fissure the smoke of Satan has entered the temple of God.” He added: “It was believed that after the Council there would be a day of sunshine in the history of the Church. There came instead a day of clouds, and darkness, of uncertainty.”

Despite these astonishing public admissions by Pope Paul VI, the general consensus in the Vatican is that since the Second Vatican Council was intended to produce a renewal it must have produced a renewal. The reality, as opposed to the myth, was expressed perfectly in 1968, only three years after the closure of the Council, by the great French Oratorian and liturgist Fr. Louis Bouyer: “Unless we are blind, we must even state bluntly that what we see looks less like the hoped-for regeneration of Catholicism than its accelerated decomposition.”<sup>4</sup> Four years later, in 1972, Professor James Hitchcock assessed the situation accurately when he wrote:

There are many curiosities in the history of the Church in the post-conciliar years, and not the least is the fact that so few progressives have noticed the extent to which the

reactionaries’ predictions prior to the Council have been proven correct and that their own expectations have been contradicted. They continue to treat the conservatives as ignorant, prejudiced, and out of touch with reality. Yet the progressives’ hope for “renewal” now seems largely chimeric, a grandiose expectation, an attractive theory, but one which failed of achievement. In the heady days of the Council it was common to hear predictions that the conciliar reforms would lead to a massive resurgence of the flagging Catholic spirit. Laymen would be stirred from their apathy and alienation and would join enthusiastically in apostolic projects. Liturgy and theology, having been brought to life and made relevant, would be constant sources of inspiration to the faithful. The religious orders, reformed to bring them into line with modernity, would find themselves overwhelmed with candidates who were generous and enthusiastic. The Church would find the number of converts increasing dramatically as it cast off its moribund visage and indeed would come to be respected and influential in worldly circles as it had not

been for centuries. In virtually every case the precise opposite of these predictions has come to pass.... [I]n terms of the all pervading spiritual revival which was expected to take place, renewal has obviously been a failure.... Little in the Church seems entirely healthy or promising; everything seems vaguely sick and vaguely hollow.<sup>5</sup>

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Professor Hitchcock’s assertion was endorsed twelve years later by no less a person than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a statement published in the December 24, 1984 English edition of *L’Osservatore Romano*:

Certainly the results [of Vatican II] seem cruelly opposed to the expectations of everyone, beginning with those of Pope John XXIII and then of Pope Paul VI: expected was a new Catholic unity and instead we have been exposed to dissension which, to use the words of Pope Paul VI, seems to have gone from self-criticism to self-destruction. Expected was a new enthusiasm, and many wound up discouraged and bored.

Expected was a great step forward; instead we find ourselves faced with a progressive process of decadence which has developed for the most part under the sign of a calling back to the Council, and has therefore contributed to discrediting it for many. The net result therefore seems

negative. I am repeating here what I said ten years after the conclusion of the work: it is incontrovertible that this period has definitely been unfavorable for the Catholic Church.

Every aspect of Catholic life subsequent to the Council that is subject to statistical verification confirms what has been described as “the negative assessment” of Pope Paul VI, Louis Bouyer, James Hitchcock, and Cardinal Ratzinger. In the November 1971 issue of the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, editor Fr. Kenneth Baker wrote:

With each year it seems that we get closer to an “American Church” separate from Rome. For millions of Catholics it already exists in fact, though not yet officially (*de facto* but not *de iure*). Even though the entrenched bureaucracy will not admit it, the Church here is in bad shape. There has been a loss of morale and élan. But what should one expect when most Catholic children do not know the basics of the faith, when heresy is openly taught and defended in “Catholic” universities, when seminarians have declined from 48,000 to about 5,000, and when only 14 million out of 55 million Catholics [i.e., about 25%] go to Church regularly on Sunday? It is not an exaggeration to say that the Church here is in a crisis.

The situation has worsened considerably in the decades since Fr. Baker gave us this gloomy assessment, as Kenneth Jones has made clear in this journal.<sup>6</sup> The official 1998 Catholic Directory for the United States reveals that the number of seminarians is now only 1700, a decline of nearly 97% from the 1965 figure. If this is a renewal of the Faith, may God help us if a decline sets in.

### Christ the King Uncrowned

Cardinal Ratzinger is certainly correct to be persuaded that “the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy.”<sup>7</sup> We would, however, be mistaken if we argued that the collapse of Catholicism throughout the Western world since the Second Vatican Council is due entirely or even principally to the liturgical revolution. The abandonment of the traditional Mass is a symptom and not the cause of the present debacle. The true cause is the abandonment, for all intents and purposes, of the fundamental doctrine that

Christ is the King of nations as well as individuals.<sup>8</sup> Cardinal Pie, a giant of the First Vatican Council, and among the very greatest French theologians of the past two centuries, gave a prophetic warning of the consequences of banishing the law of Christ from public life and restricting it to the domestic lives of its adherents:

When a country’s Christianity is reduced to the proportions of domestic life, when Christianity is no longer the soul of public life, of the power of the State and of public institutions, then Jesus Christ will treat such a country as He himself is treated. He will continue to bestow His grace and blessings on those who serve Him, but He will abandon the institutions and authorities that do not serve Him. And such institutions, authorities, Kings, and races become like the sands of the desert or like the dead leaves of autumn which can be blown away by a gust of wind.

These words are indeed prophetic, as has been made clear by Fr. Paul Marx, O.S.B., founder in 1972 of Human Life International. It is evident that Catholicism cannot have a future without Catholics. Fr. Marx makes it clear that scores of races that have repudiated the authority of Christ the King have indeed become like the dead leaves of autumn which can be blown away by a gust of wind. The primary aspect of Christ’s Kingship concerns life itself. He alone has the right to decide when a human life shall begin or shall end, and his law must be the law of any state professing to be Christian. In a Christian state

abortion, euthanasia, and the sale of contraceptives must be illegal. The birth rate necessary for a nation to reproduce itself is 2.2 children per couple. In the U.S. the birthrate presently stands at 2.1. In Europe as a whole it is 1.4, in France 1.7, in Italy 1.2. Germany, with a birthrate of 1.3, kills 350,000 babies each year, filling more coffins than cots. It is the same story for thirteen other rich nations. In Europe only one Catholic country is reproducing itself: tiny Malta, with a birthrate of 2.4 children per

family. Catholics are contracepting their Church out of existence, and the huge void is being filled by Moslems.

### Decomposition Documented

Cardinal John Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster, England, warned in 1972: “One does not need to be a prophet to realize that without a dramatic reversal of the

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present trend there will be no future for the Church in English-speaking countries.”<sup>99</sup> In England and Wales this decomposition has accelerated to the extent that unless it is immediately and drastically curtailed, which it will not be, Catholicism will have no more than a vestigial presence in those countries within twenty years. A few of the relevant statistics will make this clear. If Catholicism is to have a future, babies must be born to Catholic couples, and there must be Catholic couples to give birth to these babies. In 1944 there were 30,946 Catholic marriages in England and Wales. The figure had risen to 45,592 by 1964, but by 1998 it had fallen to 13,865, well under half the figure for 1944. Baptisms for the same years totalled 71,604; 137,623; 66,079. The collapse in the number of marriages and the number of baptisms means that there will be far fewer vocations, particularly since 90% of English teenagers have lapsed before they leave their allegedly Catholic high schools. Mass attendance has plunged from over 2 million in 1965 to about one million this year. As older Catholics die they are not being replaced in the pews by younger ones. More priests die each year than are ordained.

### The End of the Crisis

Many readers will be wondering why I have gone into such detail to prove that Fr. Bouyer is correct in claiming that the Church is undergoing an accelerating process of decomposition. I have done so to provide the necessary documentation to disprove the claims of those who insist that we should thank God that we are living in a period of unprecedented renewal. A realistic appraisal of the present situation even indicates that it is no longer accurate to speak of a crisis in the Church. A crisis in the medical sense of the word can be defined as “the point in the course of a serious disease at which a decisive change occurs, leading either to recovery or death.” The crisis point for post-conciliar Catholicism occurred on October 16, 1978 when Karol Wojtyla, Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow, was elected as Pope. He had the choice between continuing the disastrous reforms that were being enacted in the name of the Council or of returning to sound tradition, and salvaging something from the wreckage of the post-conciliar Church. The moment that his choice of names was made public it became obvious that he had chosen the former option.

Pope John Paul II convoked an extraordinary synod of

bishops in Rome in November 1985 to assess the impact of the Council upon the life of the Church. National hierarchies submitted reports on the effectiveness of the conciliar reforms in their own countries. Where English-speaking hierarchies were concerned, the result was as predictable as that of an election in the former Soviet Union. The submission of the English bishops was possibly the most fatuous, but only marginally more inane than that of the hierarchy of the United States. It was claimed that we are in the midst of a second Pentecost of such magnitude that the first was a non-event in comparison. Everyone everywhere is engaged in incessant dialogue and ceaseless renewal. The only blot upon the idyllic post-conciliar landscape is the presence of Catholics expressing “an extreme minority view.” These Catholics, whose crime is fidelity to the

Magisterium of the Church and her most venerable traditions, are denounced by the English bishops for manifesting “a lack of tolerance and a certain new fundamentalism.”

Sadly, the Extraordinary Synod itself endorsed this attitude of fatuous optimism. A God-given opportunity to face up to the facts of the post-conciliar debacle and initiate a return to Tradition was rejected. In its final report the Fathers of the Synod proclaimed:

The reason for the summoning of this synod was to celebrate, reaffirm the meaning, and carry forward the work of the Second Vatican Council. We are grateful to see that, with God’s help, we have achieved these aims. We have celebrated Vatican II wholeheartedly together, as a grace of God and gift of the Holy Spirit, from which many spiritual benefits have issued for the universal Church, for particular Churches, and for the people of our time. In the same mind and with joy we have affirmed the meaning of Vatican II as a lawful and valid expression of the deposit of faith contained in sacred Scripture and in the living tradition of the Church. *For this reason we decided to go forward on the same path that the Council pointed out* [emphasis mine].

This is precisely the reaffirmation one might expect from a synod of lemmings determined to go forward on the same path to self-destruction taken by their predecessors twenty years previously. A similar synod on the subject of evangelization had been convoked by Pope Paul

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VI in 1964. In an analysis of the working paper that the bishops of England and Wales were to use as the basis of their contribution to the Synod on Evangelization, Fr. Paul Crane, S.J., wrote:

What amazed me, then, as I read and re-read my way through this official working paper was that its author appeared so utterly unaware of this essential fact: that the Church is so busy tearing herself to pieces as to make effective evangelization a near impossibility; that her troubles are from within herself and that she must get herself right, give herself back the truth before she can give it to others.... What is this madness which causes those occupying responsible posts in the Church persistently to turn a blind eye to the disease which is gripping its vitals? Do they think you can get rid of an illness by ignoring its existence; that fatuous optimism is any kind of substitute for a cowardly unwillingness to face the truth, however unpleasant that may be? ...[E]vangelization can no more be carried out in these circumstances than you can expect a sick man get up from his bed and run a hundred yards in record time.<sup>10</sup>

Because those occupying responsible posts in the Church have persistently turned a blind eye to the disease that is gripping its vitals, this disease is now terminal and irreversible. The Church has no long-term future in the Western world where, again, within twenty to thirty years it will have only a vestigial presence.

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### The Church is Indefectible

Holy Mother Church survived the Arian and Protestant heresies, and she will survive her present afflictions. We can be certain of this because the Church is indefectible. The word *indefectible* means unable to fail. When used with reference to the Catholic Church it means that the Church will persist until the end of time, that it can never become corrupt in faith or in morals, and can never lose the apostolic hierarchy or the sacraments through which Christ communicates grace to men.<sup>11</sup> The indefectibility of the Church was guaranteed by Our Lord Who gave His

powers to His apostles in perpetuity, told them to preach His doctrine in its entirety, and promised to be with them until the end of the world. The protection of indefectibility applies to the Church as a whole, and not to any particular country at any particular time. Individual Churches may become corrupt in morals, may fall into heresy, may even apostatize. Thus at the time of the Mohammedan conquests, whole populations renounced their faith; and the Church suffered similar losses in the sixteenth century. But the defection of isolated branches does not alter the character of the main stem.<sup>12</sup> There is no guarantee, then, that the Church will not wither away almost completely in the First World. Indeed, all the available evidence indicates that this is precisely what is happening.

### What Can be Done?

The directors of the Coca-Cola company decided that they could increase their sales by adopting a new formula. Sales plunged. The directors met together to decide what action to take. After their meeting they did not inform their shareholders that they had celebrated and reaffirmed the new formula, and decided to go forward with it. They reverted to the old formula and called it “Classic Coke.” What a contrast with our Catholic bishops, who in city after city, country after country, are closing down the churches of once-flourishing parishes, while insisting that they must go forward on the same path that the Council pointed out. “Thus saith the Lord: Stand ye on the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, which is the good way, and walk ye in it: and you shall find refreshment for your souls. And they said: We will not walk” (Jer. 6:16).

A traditional Catholic, by definition, must agree with St. Thomas Aquinas: “It is absurd and a detestable shame, that we should suffer those traditions to be changed, which we have received from the fathers of old.”<sup>13</sup> We must accept that there will be no widespread

return to tradition by our fellow Catholics, and regard ourselves as a remnant. “And I will gather together the remnant of my flock out of all the lands into which I have cast them out. And I will make them return to their own fields: and they shall increase and be multiplied. And I will set up pastors over them, and they shall feed them: they shall fear no more and they shall not be dismayed” (Jer. 23:3-4). While remaining fully in union with the Roman Pontiff, and accepting our non-traditionalist brethren as our fellow Catholics, we must give our full and *exclusive* support to those priestly societies that are

dedicated exclusively to the celebration of the Mass and sacraments according to the books that were in use before the Second Vatican Council and that embody the traditions we have received from the fathers of old – traditions that formed the basis of the spirituality of countless saints of the Roman Rite. In the United States there are three such societies, that of St. Pius X which operates without the approval of the bishops, and the Fraternity of St. Peter and the Institute of Christ the King which operate only with episcopal approval. It is sad to relate that both the Fraternity of St. Peter and the Institute of Christ the King are having to turn away excellent young men with genuine vocations to the priesthood because of lack of space in their seminaries. If we are to be a truly faithful remnant we cannot let this happen. We must not simply be generous in helping these societies; our support must be of a sacrificial nature. When we consider what the faithful and despised remnant of Catholics in England and Wales did to support their martyr priests, any financial sacrifices that we make will pale into insignificance. If every reader of this journal were prepared to make a sacrificial donation to assist Fr. Paul Carr to complete the next wing of his seminary, what a difference this would make to the next generation of traditionalists.

Those of us who fight for our Latin liturgical heritage may be termed reactionary, ignorant, or even schismatic, but in reality we are in the direct tradition of the Maccabees of the Old Testament. The commentary on the Mass for the twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost in the St. Andrew Daily Missal states:

One of the most outstanding lessons which may be drawn from the books of Maccabees...is the reverence due to the things of God. What is generally called the rebellion of the Maccabees was in reality a magnificent example of fidelity to God, to his law, and to the covenants and promises that he had made to his people. These were threatened with oblivion and it was to uphold them that the Maccabees rebelled.

The Mass of St. Pius V is the epitomization of the faith of our fathers. It is the liturgy celebrated in secret by the martyr priests of England and Wales, it is the liturgy that was celebrated at the Mass rocks of Ireland, it is the liturgy celebrated by the North American martyrs who died deaths too horrific to describe, it is the Mass described by the great English Oratorian Fr. Frederick Faber as “the most beautiful thing this side of heaven.” But we must not be content with the Mass and the traditional sacramental rites alone. We must endeavor to regulate our own lives strictly in accordance with the requirements of Christ the King. We must make every effort to bring

public legislation into accord with these requirements as far as we possibly can. Abortion, pornography, and homosexual propaganda were once illegal – they could be made illegal again if we were prepared to make the same effort in the other direction that the liberals do in theirs. In such matters relating to the public good, traditional Catholics should be prepared to cooperate with men of any religion or none.

My assessment of the present and future of Catholicism in the First World could be described as pessimistic, but it is, in fact, realistic. Still, it would be fitting to conclude on a note of optimism. Although we shall remain a remnant as the years pass, we shall form a greater and greater proportion of those Catholics who still practice their faith, particularly with regard to the number of vocations and the number of children born, among whom those vocations must be found. In France it seems likely that more Catholics will be assisting at the traditional Mass than the new within ten years. There can be no doubt that a number of influential cardinals in Rome now realize the importance of the preservation of the traditional liturgical rites for the good of the Church.

Although Catholicism will have no more than a vestigial presence in the First World within two or three decades, if we are prepared to give total commitment to our traditional beliefs this could well be a largely traditional presence, which could then begin to expand as did the Catholic remnant in England once the penal laws were abolished. Is this merely a dream, an impossible dream, a vision? Perhaps, perhaps not. We can certainly draw comfort from Habakuk 2:3: “For as yet the vision is far off and it shall appear at the end and shall not lie: if it make any delay wait for it, for it shall surely come and it shall not be slack.” ✠

1 *Catholic Times*, May 12, 2000.

2 *Le Spectacle du Monde*, January 2000.

3 *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 8, 1968.

4 L. Bouyer, *The Decomposition of Catholicism* (Chicago, 1970), p. 1.

5 J. Hitchcock, *The Decline and Fall of Radical Catholicism* (New York, 1972), pp. 22-23.

6 See the 1996 Winter and Summer issues of *The Latin Mass*.

7 J. Ratzinger, *Milestones* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1999), p. 148.

8 See my book *The Second Vatican Council and Religious Liberty* for documentation on how to all intents and purposes the Second Vatican Council abandoned the traditional teaching that Christ should reign over nations as well as individuals. (Available from the Neumann Press, Long Prairie, MN 56347.)

9 *The Times Literary Supplement*, December 22, 1972.

10 *Christian Order*, May 1974, p. 296.

11 For an explanation of the doctrine of Indefectibility see my book *I Am with You Always*, available from the Neumann Press.

12 *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York, 1913), vol. III, p. 756.

13 *Summa Theologica*, II, I, Q. 97, art. 2.