



Modernism: Then and Now

by Ronald P. McArthur

The word modernism has had in its short history so many meanings and clusters of meanings that it seems to be an obstacle to serious discussion. Before we banish the word, however, we should consider that the great and saintly Pius X spoke unambiguously of “the Modernists (as they are commonly and rightly called),” spoke further “of the doctrine of the Modernists,” and called Modernism “the synthesis of all heresies.” While enlightened Catholics are usually reluctant to contradict the Pope outright, they are nevertheless ready to characterize his claim as tainted with his own misgivings and misunderstandings of a time of intellectual ferment. Now, we are asked to believe, it is both inopportune and clumsy to raise again the specter of a menacing evil that was partly imaginary in his time, and wholly so in ours.

On the other hand, the more recent collapse of things Catholic within the Church is not imaginary. It is of such magnitude that it seems beyond our limited capacities to get to the root causes of so complete an upheaval. It seems that all the finite mind can do is focus on certain areas of the destruction, in the hope that it illumines, however provisionally, a disaster that none but the blind can explain away.

We are not, however, left to our own devices. If *Pascendi Gregis* was ever wise and probing in its own time, it has proved itself prophetic in ours; as such it provides us with the understanding and guidelines we can well use if we are to face our plight with the hope of maintaining our faith against those who, wittingly or unwittingly, would destroy it.

Whether Belloc has overstated the case or not, it is beyond doubt that over the centuries the Catholic Church has inspired, nourished and given shape to the European civilization we prize as our own. While she has in her saints, scholars, poets, artists and composers expended enormous energies to bring about an unrivaled good, she has nevertheless been routinely maligned in modern times as an enemy of the progress and well being we are said to have achieved in spite of her. So much is this the case that it has become axiomatic among the more cultivated and

sophisticated Catholics to look condescendingly upon the fortress Church of Trent, and upon the popes who thought fit to raise their voices in defense of it. After having, so it goes, resisted (and unsuccessfully) the forces of modernity, the Church should now contribute her efforts as an equal partner with them in order to bring about their yet unrealized possibilities within a global civilization of truth and goodness.

However, unless in our exuberance we are ready to reject our civilization root and branch, we cannot sever our connection with the traditional Church. The shaping of this civilization has depended not only upon the greatness of some of her members – upon their holiness, their courage, their gifts and their sufferings – but upon their faith as well. The contents of that faith were given them by the teaching Church, which, against the ever-present attacks of those who would pervert it, was able over the centuries to define, develop and protect the sacred doctrine entrusted to her. Without the concern for doctrine and the anathemas that follow upon it, our civilization would have been entirely different; and without a common doctrine there would have been no single civilization. It is Christian orthodoxy that before anything else is responsible for our Western civilization, and heresy which has all but destroyed it.

The defense of Christian doctrine, therefore, is the defense of what has made us what we are as Western men; much more importantly, however, it is the defense of the truth about God and man which according to St. Paul must be preached “in season and out of season” – the defense of that truth by which we can live sanely in this world and look hopefully to the next.

This body of doctrine, however, is not only destroyed by well-defined heresies which contradict now one part and now another, but also shredded entirely by the errors of the modern philosophers which cripple the natural bent of the mind and deflect it from the foundations upon which the Church must rely if she is to expound faithfully to us what Christ Our Lord taught the apostles. Among these foundations is the common sense notion that there is a continuity between the activities of our senses and our intellect, and that beginning with the senses we can through ordinary experience come to know conceptually a reality outside ourselves as it is in itself. While to most believers this may not seem worth mentioning, it becomes so for at least two reasons: While the greatest ancient and medieval thinkers affirmed that the human mind is in

touch with the reality of things as it apprehends them through the senses, the greatest modern philosophers have in different ways denied this; more to our point, to concede their denial demands that in all honesty we must scuttle what has heretofore been the dogmatic teaching of the Church.

The most influential, and perhaps the greatest, of the modern philosophers is Immanuel Kant. While he did not, as did some of the moderns, deny a reality independent of the mind, he did declare that reality, which he called things-in-themselves, to be completely unknowable. His error is one of the most serious and destructive of all, because while it does not deny that we sense something external to ourselves, it does limit our experience of it to what he calls phenomena, the sensible appearances of things. There is here lost the continuity of sensation and intellection, a fatal breach that separates us from any understanding of things as they are. If we follow him, there can then be no place for a knowledge of substance, and no arguments for the existence of God or the immortality of the soul that cannot be controverted with equally

cogent arguments. There can be, in short, no preambles of faith, and so faith becomes dissociated completely from the life of reason, and any attempt at Christian apologetics becomes futile. Granting this Kantian doctrine, it follows that the Catholic faith as taught and promulgated by the teaching Church for almost two millennia is based on a mistake that

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renders her doctrine not only false but impossible.

St. Pius X gives witness to this when he teaches that those in the Church who adopt the view that “human reason is confined entirely within the field of phenomena, that is to say, to things that appear, and in the manner in which they appear” do then “place the foundation of religious philosophy in that doctrine which is commonly called *Agnosticism*” (6). He is further a reliable teacher when in his exposition of Modernism he begins with philosophy, for if in times past there were particular heresies that were more purely theological because there were no all-encompassing philosophical disagreements to begin with, the false philosophy of our own times has made things much worse. This is as it must be, for reason, however it stands with reality, always precedes faith; the account it gives of its own activities, however clearly or confusedly conceived, will inexorably determine the character and content of religious belief. Those, for example, who accept the Kantian limitations of reason

will at the same time deny some of the most important presuppositions of the faith, which the Church, in order to defend them without ambiguity in these times of peril, has been forced to teach as dogmas. This the Pope makes clear: “Given these premises, everyone will at once perceive what becomes of *Natural Theology*, of the *motives of credibility*, of *external revelation*. . . . Yet the Vatican Council has defined, ‘If anyone says that the one true God, our Creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty by the natural light of human reason by the things that are made, let him be anathema’; and also ‘If anyone says that it is not possible or not expedient that man be taught, through the medium of divine revelation, about God and the worship to be paid Him, let him be anathema’; and finally, ‘If anyone says that divine revelation cannot be made credible by external signs, and that therefore men should be drawn to the faith only by their personal internal experience or by private revelation let him be anathema’” (6). The one error leads not only to a single well-defined heresy, but also to several at the same time. It further relocates the natural foundation of religion from the ordinary experience of the world and the capacity of the mind to understand it sufficiently to know the existence of God to an inner experience of the divine which, divorced from such preambles, can best be called a religious sense. This immediate sense of things divine becomes, as we learn in *Pascendi*, a counterfeit religion which, having disparaged reason in the beginning, can yet use it as a servant to design a new religion, with a new understanding of theology, of history, of Scripture, of tradition, of dogma, of the development of dogma, of the relationship of faith and reason, of the sacraments, and of the Church itself.

With reason then does St. Pius declare that this new religious sense leads to a synthesis of all heresies. One might even say that it reaches beyond heresy; it is not so much in disagreement with a single teaching, or even several of them, as it is with the possibility of Christian doctrine itself. Those therefore who, wishing to remain Catholic while at the same time breathing the air of this false faith must, wittingly or unwittingly, redefine the religion they claim to uphold, so that were they successful the Church as it has come down to us would disappear, the name alone remaining.

Though there have always been those over the years

who have derided St. Pius X for what in their mind is a narrow and reactionary stand against progress and enlightenment, they would have received no encouragement from our present Holy Father. While *Fides et Ratio* brims over with understanding and charity, while it includes all it can under the capacious tent of Christian revelation and natural reason, it is yet replete with the necessary misgivings one would expect from the supreme pastor of souls. We are told by John Paul II that “[w]e face a great challenge at the end of the millennium to move from phenomena to foundation, a step as necessary as it is urgent” (83); that “[r]ather than make use of the human capacity to know, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned” (5); that “Christian revelation is the true lodestar of men and women as they strive to make their way amid the pressures of an immanentist habit of mind and the constrictions of a technocratic logic” (15); that “[d]eprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and

experience, and so runs the risk of no longer being a universal proposition” (48); that, according to some modern thinkers, “the time for certainties is irrevocably past, and the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning; where everything is provisional and ephemeral” (91). He also alerts us to the baneful consequences of a fundamental error in moral philosophy: “once the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost, inevitably the notion of

conscience also changes. Conscience is no longer considered. . . . as an act of a person’s intelligence, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation and thus to express a judgment about the right conduct to be chosen here and now.” This leads to granting to the individual conscience “the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil, and acting accordingly” (98). And *Fides et Ratio* lets it be known that these errors and their offspring are not limited to the world outside the Church, but are found as well among Catholics. If then modernism had meaning for St. Pius X, so, it would seem, can it have the same meaning for us as well; or if the word has become tedious the reality yet remains, and it will not disappear by banishing the word.

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things that the understanding of the revealed truth itself is distorted. Listen again to the Holy Father: “The *intellectus fidei*...demands the contribution of a philosophy of being which first of all would enable *dogmatic theology* to perform its functions appropriately” (96). So much is this the case that those immersed in the false philosophies tend towards fideism, to the disparagement of the dogmas they can no longer understand: “Other forms of latent fideism appear in the scant attention accorded to speculative theology, and in disdain for classical philosophy from which the terms of both the understanding of faith and the ancient formulation of dogmas have been drawn” (55). Though *Fides et Ratio* is comprehensive in its understanding of reason, of faith, of their intimate relationship, and of the living Church which has depended upon and fostered this relationship, and comprehensive beyond any other encyclical of its kind, it is yet laced with the same doctrinal stance. The Church, no matter how inviting she might be towards more modern and contemporary philosophies of being, will not and cannot relinquish its traditional modes of thought, cannot relinquish the philosophical inheritance of Greece and Rome, cannot, in the development of dogmas, redefine them; she continues to teach that in the thinking of St. Thomas “the demands of reason and the power of faith found the most elevated synthesis ever attained by human thought...” (78). This approbation repeats in its own words the teaching of the popes since the death of St. Thomas, and brings with it the antidote to the modernism which is so destructive of things Catholic. That is why St. Pius saw fit to order in his own time the study of St. Thomas as one of the first means to counteract the virus he opposed: “In the first place, with regard to studies, We will and strictly ordain that scholastic philosophy be made the basis of the sacred sciences.... And let it be understood above all things that when We prescribe scholastic philosophy we understand chiefly that which the Angelic Doctor has bequeathed us...” (45).

The study of philosophy is for the sake of the truth, as is the study of theology, and as such the errors which will inevitably be made can become, under the best of circumstances, the means to a better grasp of reality. If those errors, both philosophical and theological, were confined to the arguments and discussions of intellectuals in the schools, they would even be useful. However, as John Paul

II has emphasized, all men are in some way philosophers, and the disagreements of the intellectuals never stay within the academic walls; they spill into society at large, and can disturb and ruin individuals, families, civil societies and the whole of civilization. Their power is particularly dangerous when we consider that the Gospel is proclaimed to all men, and that when they exist within the Church they can so discolor it as to prohibit those for whom the saving truth is meant from ever knowing with certainty what they should believe. If there is to be a new evangelization in our times, it cannot, so long as it is Catholic, happen without dogma, without tradition, without the wedding of faith and reason, without a sane philosophical underpinning – and, be it noted, without the knowledge and wisdom of St. Thomas, the greatest of theologians. Without, therefore, the serious and constant study of St. Thomas in our seminaries, colleges and universities, we will try in vain to evangelize the non-

Christian world. It would be better to work for a rebirth of the genuine Catholic tradition of learning, so that we might have something of content to proclaim to others.

The present confusion within the Church is so extensive, the voice of orthodoxy so muffled and contorted whenever it even reaches the faithful, that one cannot but see in our times a situation similar to the one St. Pius saw fit to describe when he raised his voice. There is, however, one difference. The holy Pope was moved to act “especially by the fact that the

partisans of error are to be sought not only among the Church’s open enemies; but, what is to be most dreaded and deplored, in her very bosom, and are the more mischievous the less they keep in the open” (2).

Not any more. ✠

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