

*This analysis does not denigrate Pope Francis, Martin Luther, or those who love our Catholic Church just as she is. It presents a Catholic church scrubbed of the many historical influences that shaped her development without a judgment on whether that would be good or bad. That is left up to the reader. This “church” without the Roman Catholicism certainly would be a different church, and seemingly would have little power over civilization. Those who are trying to shape it to be such it appears would no longer to have any authority over any other member in this new church vision, thus making their roles as theologians, bishops, and popes obsolete and close to disappearing. It, however, does not address what it means to be Catholic. It begs the question, “It is possible for the church to be catholic without the Roman Catholic Church?”*

*— Fr. Perozich*

## **Bergoglio's Reform Was Written Before. By Martin Luther**



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*Much has been written in sketching an appraisal of the first five years of the pontificate of Francis and of his real or imaginary “revolution.”*

*But rarely, if ever, with the acuteness and extensive scope of the analysis published below.*

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*His essay is being issued for the very first time on Settimo Cielo.*

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## **THE END OF “ROMAN CATHOLICISM?”**

***by Roberto Pertici***

1. At this point in the pontificate of Francis, I believe it can be reasonably maintained that this marks the twilight of that imposing historical reality which can be defined as “Roman Catholicism.”

This does not mean, properly understood, that the Catholic Church is coming to an end, but that what is fading is the way in which it has historically structured and represented itself in recent centuries.

It seems evident to me, in fact, that this is the plan being deliberately pursued by the “brain trust” that has clustered around Francis: a plan understood both as an extreme response to the crisis in relations between the Church and the modern world, and as a precondition for a renewed ecumenical course together with the other Christian confessions, especially the Protestant.

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2. By “Roman Catholicism” I mean that grand historical, theological, and juridical construction which has its origin in the

Hellenization (in terms of the philosophical aspect” and Romanization (in terms of the political-juridical aspect) of primitive Christianity and is based on the primacy of the successors of Peter, as emerges from the crisis of the late ancient world and from the theoretical systematization of the Gregorian age (“Dictatus Papae”).

Over the subsequent centuries, the Church also established its own internal legal system, canon law, looking to Roman law as its model. And this juridical element contributed to gradually shaping a complex hierarchical organization with precise internal norms that regulate the life both of the “bureaucracy of celibates” (an expression of Carl Schmitt) that manages it and of the laity who are part of it.

The other decisive moment of formation of “Roman Catholicism” is, finally, the ecclesiology elaborated by the council of Trent, which reiterates the centrality of ecclesiastical mediation in view of salvation, in contrast with the Lutheran theses of the “universal priesthood,” and therefore establishes the hierarchical, united, and centralized character of the Church; its right to supervise and, if need be, to condemn positions that are in contrast with the orthodox formulation of the truths of faith; its role in the administration of the sacraments.

This ecclesiology finds its seal in the dogma of pontifical infallibility proclaimed by Vatican Council I, put to the test eighty years later in the dogmatic affirmation of the Assumption of Mary into heaven (1950), which together with the previous dogmatic proclamation of her Immaculate Conception (1854) also reiterates the centrality of Marian devotion.

It would be reductive, however, if we were to limit ourselves to what has been said so far. Because there also exists - or better, existed - a widespread “Catholic mindset,” made up of the following:

- a cultural attitude based on a realism with regard to human nature that is sometimes disenchanted and willing to “understand all” as a precondition for “forgiving all”;

- a non-ascetic spirituality that is understanding toward certain material aspects of life, and not inclined to disdain them;  
- engagement in everyday charity toward the humble and needy, without the need to idealize them or almost make new idols of them;

- a willingness also to represent itself in its own magnificence, and therefore not deaf to the evidence of beauty and of the arts, as testimony to a supreme Beauty toward which the Christian must tend;

- a subtle examination of the most inward movements of the heart, of the interior struggle between good and evil, of the dialectic between “temptations” and the response of conscience.

It could therefore be said that in what I call “Roman Catholicism” there are interwoven three aspects, obviously in addition to that of religion: the aesthetical, the juridical, the political. This is a matter of a rational vision of the world that makes itself a visible and solid institution and fatally enters into conflict with the idea of representation that emerged in modernity, based on individualism and on a conception of power that, rising from the bottom up, ends up bringing into question the principle of authority.

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3. This conflict has been considered in different ways, often opposing, by those who have analyzed it. Carl Schmitt looked with admiration to the “resistance” of “Roman Catholicism,” considered the last force capable of reining in the dissipatory forces of modernity. Others have made tough criticisms of him: in this struggle, the Catholic Church is seen as having ruinously emphasized its juridical-hierarchical, authoritarian, external traits.

Beyond these opposing evaluations, it is certain that in recent centuries “Roman Catholicism” has been pushed onto the defensive. What has gradually brought its social presence into question has been above all the birth of industrial society and the consequent process of modernization, which has opened a series of anthropological mutations that are still underway. Almost as if “Roman Catholicism” were “organic” (to say it the old Marxist way) to a society that is agrarian, hierarchical, static, based on penury and fear and instead could not find relevance in a society that is “affluent,” dynamic, characterized by social mobility.

A first response to this situation of crisis was given by the ecumenical council Vatican II (1962-1965), which according to the intentions of Pope John XXIII, who had convened it, was to effect a “pastoral updating,” looking with new optimism at the modern world, which meant finally letting the guard down: no longer carrying on with an age-old duel, but opening a dialogue and effecting an encounter.

The world was swept up during those years in extraordinary changes and in an unprecedented economic development: probably the most sensational, rapid, and profound revolution in the human condition of which there is any trace in history (Eric J. Hobsbawm). The event of the council contributed to this mutation, but was in its turn engulfed by it: the rhythm of the “updatings” - fostered also by the dizzying transformations in the surroundings and by the general conviction, sung by Bob Dylan, that “the times they are a-changin’” - got out of hand for the hierarchy, or at least for that part of it which wanted to effect a reform, not a revolution.

Thus between 1967 and 1968 one witnessed the “watershed” of Paul VI, which expressed itself in the preoccupied analysis of the turbulence of '68 and then of the “sexual revolution” contained in the encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*” of July 1968. So great was the pessimism to which that great pontiff came in the 1970’s that, conversing with the philosopher Jean Guitton, he wondered to

himself and asked him, echoing a disquieting passage from the Gospel of Luke: “When the Son of Man returns, will he still find faith upon the earth?” And he added: “What strikes me, when I consider the Catholic world, is that within Catholicism there sometimes seems to predominate a type of thinking that is not Catholic, and it could happen that this non-Catholic thinking within Catholicism could tomorrow become the stronger one.”

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4. It is well known how the successors of Paul VI responded to this situation: by combining change and continuity; effecting - on certain questions - the appropriate corrections (memorable, from this point of view, was the condemnation of “liberation theology”); by seeking a dialogue with modernity that would be at the same time a challenge: on the issues of life, the rationality of man, religious freedom.

Benedict XVI, in what was the true agenda-setting text of his pontificate (the address to the pontifical curia of December 22, 2005), then reiterated a firm point: that the great decisions of Vatican II were to be read and interpreted in the light of the preceding tradition of the Church, and therefore also of the ecclesiology that emerged from the council of Trent and from Vatican II. Even for the simple reason that one cannot effect a formal recantation of the faith believed and lived by generations and generations, without introducing an irreparable “vulnus” in the self-representation and widespread perception of an institution like the Catholic Church.

It is also known how this stance caused a widespread rejection not only “extra ecclesiam,” where it manifested itself in an aggression against Benedict XVI in the media and in intellectual circles that was absolutely unprecedented, but - in the manner of Nicodemus and the murmuring that are congenial in the clerical world - also in the ecclesiastical body, which essentially left that pope alone in the most critical moments of his pontificate. This led, I believe, to his resignation in February of

2013, which - apart from the reassuring interpretations - appears as an epochal event, the reasons and long-term implications of which still remain entirely to be explored.

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5. This was the situation inherited by Pope Francis. I limit myself only to pointing out the biographical and cultural aspects that in part made Jorge Mario Bergoglio “ab initio” an outsider to what I have called “Roman Catholicism”:

- the peripheral character of his formation, profoundly rooted in the Latin American world, which makes it difficult for him to embody the universality of the Church, or at least drives him to live it in a new way, pushing to the side European and North American civilization;

- his membership in an order, like the Society of Jesus, that over the past half century has effected one of the most sensational political-cultural repositionings ever heard of in recent history, moving from a “reactionary” position to one that is variously “revolutionary” and therefore giving proof of a pragmatism that in many of its aspects is worthy of reflection;

- his estrangement from the aesthetic dimension that is proper to “Roman Catholicism,” his showy renunciation of any representation of dignity of office (the pontifical apartments, the red mozzetta and the usual pontifical trappings, the residence in Castel Gandolfo) and what he calls “customs of a Renaissance prince” (starting with being late for and then absent from a concert of classical music in his honor at the beginning of the pontificate).

I would rather seek to emphasize what could be in my opinion the unifying element of the many mutations that Pope Francis is introducing in Catholic tradition.

I do so basing myself on a little book by an eminent churchman, who is generally considered the theologian of reference for the current pontificate, eloquently cited by Francis as early as his first Angelus, on March 17, 2013, when he said: “In

the past few days I have been reading a book by a Cardinal — Cardinal Kasper, a clever theologian, a good theologian — on mercy. And that book did me a lot of good, but do not think I am promoting my cardinals' books! Not at all! Yet it has done me so much good, so much good.”

The book by Walter Kasper to which I am referring is entitled: “Martin Luther. An ecumenical perspective,” and it is the reworked and expanded version of a conference that the cardinal held on January 18, 2016, in Berlin. The chapter to which I would like to call attention is the sixth: “The ecumenical relevance of Martin Luther.”

The whole chapter is built on a binary argumentation, according to which Luther was led to deepen the rupture with Rome primarily because of the refusal of the popes and the bishops to proceed with a reform. It was only in the face of Rome's deafness - Kasper writes - that the German reformer, “on the basis of his understanding of the universal priesthood, had to content himself with an emergency organization. He continued, however, to trust in the fact that the truth of the Gospel would assert itself on its own, and he therefore left the door fundamentally open for a possible future agreement.”

But also on the Catholic side, at the beginning of the 16th century, many doors remained open, and in short there was a fluid situation. Kasper writes: “There was no harmoniously structured Catholic ecclesiology, but only approaches that were more a doctrine on the hierarchy than a real and proper ecclesiology. The systematic elaboration of ecclesiology would take place only in controversial theology, as an antithesis to the polemics of the Reformation against the papacy. The papacy thus became, in a way unknown until then, the distinguishing mark of Catholicism. The respective confessional theses and antitheses influenced and impeded each other.”

One must therefore proceed today - according to the overall meaning of Kasper's argumentation - with a

“deconfessionalization” of both the Reformed confessions and of the Catholic Church, in spite of the fact that this never portrayed itself as a “confession,” but as the universal Church. One must return to something like the situation that preceded the outbreak of the religious conflicts in the 16th century.

While in the Lutheran camp this “deconfessionalization” has already been widely achieved (with the aggressive secularization of those societies, for which the problems that were at the foundation of the confessional controversies became irrelevant for the overwhelming majority of “Reformed” Christians), in the Catholic camp instead there is still much to be done, precisely because of the survival of aspects and structures of what I have called “Roman Catholicism.” It is therefore above all to the Catholic world that the invitation to “deconfessionalization” is addressed. Kasper invokes this as a “rediscovery of original catholicity, not restricted to a confessional point of view.”

To this end, it would therefore be necessary to bring to completion the surmounting of Tridentine ecclesiology and that of Vatican I. According to Kasper, Vatican II opened the way, but its reception has been controversial and anything but straightforward. This brings us to the role of the current pontiff: “Pope Francis has inaugurated a new phase in this process of reception. He emphasizes the ecclesiology of the people of God, the people of God on the journey, the sense of faith of the people of God, the synodal structure of the Church, and for the comprehension of unity is putting an interesting new approach into play. He no longer describes ecumenical unity with the image of concentric circles around the center, but with the image of the polyhedron, a multifaceted reality, not a ‘puzzle’ put together from the outside, but a whole and, since this is a matter of a precious stone, a whole that reflects the light that strikes it in a marvelously multiple way. Reconnecting with Oscar Cullmann, Pope Francis borrows the concept of diversity reconciled.”

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6. if we briefly reconsider in this light the behaviors of Francis that have raised the biggest sensation, we better understand their unifying logic:

- his emphasis, right from the day of the election, of his office as bishop of Rome, rather than as pontiff of the universal Church;

- his destructuring of the canonical figure of the Roman pontiff (the famous “who am I to judge?”), at the basis of which - therefore - are not only the factors of character mentioned above, but a deeper reason, of a theological nature;

- the practical downgrading of some of the most characteristic sacraments of the “Catholic mindset” (auricular confession, indissoluble marriage, the Eucharist), realized for pastoral reasons of “mercy” and “welcome”;

- the exaltation of “parrhesia” within the Church, of presumed creative confusion, to which is added a vision of the Church almost as a federation of local Churches, endowed with extensive disciplinary, liturgical and even doctrinal powers.

There are those who feel scandalized over the fact that in Poland an interpretation of “Amoris Laetitia” will go into effect that is different from the one that will be realized in Germany or in Argentina, concerning communion for the divorced and remarried. But Francis could respond that this is a matter of different sides of that polyhedron which is the Catholic Church, to which could also be added sooner or later - why not? - the post-Lutheran Reformed Churches, precisely in a spirit of “diversity reconciled.”

On this path, it is easy to foresee that the next steps will be a rethinking of catechesis and of the liturgy in an ecumenical sense, here too with the journey facing the Catholic side being much more demanding than the one facing the “Protestant” side, considering the different points of departure, as also a downgrading of the sacred order in its most “Catholic” aspect, meaning in ecclesiastical celibacy, with the result that the Catholic

hierarchy will even cease to be the Schmittian “bureaucracy of celibates.”

One understands better, then, the genuine exaltation of the figure and work of Luther that was produced at the top of the Catholic Church on the occasion of the five hundredth anniversary of 1517, all the way to the controversial stamp dedicated to him by the Vatican post office, with him and Melanchthon at the feet of Jesus on the cross.

Personally I have no doubt that Luther is one of the giants of "universal history," as it used to be commonly called, but “est modus in rebus”: above all the institutions must have a sort of modesty in carrying out upheavals in these dimensions, on pain of ridicule: the same sort with which we were assailed in the twentieth century, when we saw the communists back then rehabilitating in unison and by command the “heretics” that they had strenuously condemned and fought until the day before: the “Counterorder, comrades!” of the cartoons by Giovannino Guareschi.

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7. So if yesterday “Roman Catholicism” was perceived as a foreign body by modernity, a foreignness for which it was not pardoned, it is natural that its twilight should now be hailed with joy by the “modern world” in its political, media, and cultural institutions, and that therefore the current pontiff should be seen as the one who is healing that fracture between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the world of information, of international organizations and “think tanks,” which - opened in 1968 with “*Humanae Vitae*” - had become deeper during the subsequent pontificates.

And it is also natural that ecclesiastical groups and circles that already in the 1970’s were hoping for the surpassing of the Tridentine Church and interpreted Vatican II in this perspective, after having lived under wraps over the past forty years, have today come out into the open and with their lay and ecclesiastical

heirs should figure among the components of that “brain trust” which was mentioned at the beginning.

There remain open, however, several questions that would impose further reflections that are not easy.

Will the operation carried forward by Pope Francis and by his “entourage” see lasting success, or will it end up encountering resistance within the hierarchy and what remains of the Catholic people, greater than the decidedly marginal forms that have emerged so far?

And more in general: what consequences could this have on the overall cultural, political, religious cohesion of the Western world, which, in spite of having reached an elevated level of secularization, has long had one of its load-bearing structures precisely in “Roman Catholicism”?

But it is preferable that historians would not make prophecies and would content themselves with understanding something, if they are able, about the processes underway.

*(English translation by [Matthew Sherry](#), Ballwin, Missouri, U.S.A.)*