

The Conversion of the Papacy and the Present Church Crisis

The reform we need is in the direction of simplicity, transparency, and integrity – what many thought we were getting in Francis, before discovering otherwise – and whatever does not serve directly the task of the successor of Peter should be marginalized or eliminated.

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Editor's note: *The following essay by Dr. Farrow is much longer and more detailed in many ways than the usual feature articles published by CWR. But we are publishing it because we think it addresses, in a serious and learned way, some essential theological questions facing the Church today. The views and opinions expressed in the piece are Dr. Farrow's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the editors or of Ignatius Press.*

One salutary aspect of the troubling Bergolio pontificate is that it forces us to think about the papal office as such. This appeared plainly enough in the recent **response** of Cardinal Ouellet to Archbishop Viganò, suggesting (with pontifical approval) that the latter was out of communion with the pope. It also appeared in the Secretariat of State's **secret agreement** with the Chinese government, in which canon 377 and the integrity of the process of apostolic succession were violated in exchange for a purely symbolic **acknowledgment** of the pope as titular head of all Chinese Catholics. It appeared, still more starkly albeit inconsequentially, in Fr Rosica's **notorious remark** about the pope being above scripture and tradition and the Church now being ruled quite openly by an individual qua individual, as also in Bishop Carrara's **heretical claim** that "God's Spirit is embodying itself in Francis's spirit." It appeared in the *Apostolic Constitution Episcopalis Communio of the Holy Father Francis*, which carries forward the Bergoglian "conversion of the papacy" (*EC* 10; cf. *Evangelii gaudium* 32) by means of the putative transfer of magisterial authority from the pope to an ad hoc synod of bishops – a move intended to lend weight, for example, to the youth synod's **Final Report**, which will be used further to convert the Catholic idea of the family and of the conscience, so that the latter also may stand above scripture and tradition.

In short, there is an awful lot of conversion going on here, as indeed there must be, given the quality of catholicity that belongs to the Church (Cyril, *CL* 18.23). Once you begin converting the plumbing, so to say, and you must renovate the entire house. But where better to begin than with the papacy itself, which John Paul II and Benedict XVI both thought must undergo change? That is exactly where the work began immediately after Cardinal Bergoglio's election, following **plans** prepared in advance, and it has already been going on long enough now that it is impossible to simply stop it, were that desirable. Nor is it desirable, as the present sexual scandals and doctrinal deviations demonstrate; for the moral corruption on the seven hills and on the shores of the seven seas, which has so seriously infected and compromised the Church, began infecting it at least a century ago. **Change was and is needed. But not this change.**

True and False Respect for the Pontiff

To understand the Bergoglian conversion of the papacy we need to understand the larger crisis – many are at last admitting that there is a crisis – to which it belongs. That crisis is a concatenated one that has taken some time to break into the open. It involves, *first*, a loss of faith in tradition and a failure to stand fast (2 Thess. 2:15); *second*, widespread

sexual immorality among the laity and the clergy; *third*, malfeasance in high office, including the papal office, regarding doctrine, discipline, appointments, and finances; *fourth*, a nexus of deceptions and cover-ups in which even the otherwise well-behaved have too often become enmeshed, despite the fact that “no prelate should desire that any good be achieved by a lie” (Aquinas, *Super II ad Thess.*, C2, L1, 32); *fifth*, in service of those cover-ups a gross and, in some mouths, richly hypocritical distortion of respect for the pontiff, a distortion that does not stop short of substituting a false doctrine of communion such as that which appears in Ouellet’s letter; *sixth*, abandonment of the Great Commission in favor of a mission of inclusiveness, where “making disciples of all nations” decidedly does not mean “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19f.); *seventh*, a deliberate plan to use the papacy to dissolve what is left of the centralized, authoritarian Tridentine Church and to overcome the synthesis of Vatican I and II that was attempted, with limited success, by the previous four popes – that is, to generate a decentralized, morally and doctrinally flexible, post-modern Church that is open both to Protestant and to pagan elements, with a vast and welcoming Courtyard of the Gentiles.

Obviously I cannot elaborate on all this here. I want to focus on the fifth feature of the crisis, which would not exist but for the first four and which is required by the final two. By “distortion of respect for the pontiff” I mean more than at first appears in the much remarked (and truly remarkable) statements reprised above. Anyone learning of them should not fail to be horrified by them, and by the tacit or open support they get from those who have spent much of their lives attacking Francis’s predecessors. But we should be no less horrified by those ordinary folk who are trying so very hard to convert their habitual respect for the occupant of the Chair of Peter into the kind of respect that is now being demanded of them – a respect that blurs the distinction between the person and the office and amounts, as I have said before, to a **clericalism of one**.

Roberto de Mattei is very helpful here. In *Tu es Petrus*, he argues that what is needed now is “true devotion to the Chair of Saint Peter,” not false. He insists that this true devotion is, among other things, “devotion to the visibility of the Church” and as such indispensable to the spiritual life. De Mattei offers a profound critique of the papalotry so much in evidence today. “Papalotry,” he says, “is a false devotion which does not see in the reigning Pope one of the 265 successors of Peter, but considers him to be a new Christ on earth, who personalizes, reinterprets, reinvents and imposes the Magisterium of his predecessors, expanding and perfecting the doctrine

of Christ.” He observes astutely that this papalotry, “before it is a theological error, is a deformed psychological and moral attitude,” one that shies from the struggle that is proper to the Church militant:

Papalotrists are generally conservatives or moderates who deceive themselves on the possibility of reaching good results in life without a fight, without effort. The secret of their life, is always to adapt themselves, to bring the best out of every situation. Their watchword is that everything is calm, there's no need to worry about anything.

The price for that is that they must see the pope, not as “the Vicar of Christ on earth, who has the duty of handing on the doctrine he has received, but [as] a successor of Christ who perfects the doctrine of his predecessors, adapting it to the changing of the times.” They must even allow that “the doctrine of the Gospel is in perpetual evolution, because it coincides with the magisterium of the reigning Pontiff.” Thus “the ‘living’ magisterium substitutes the perennial Magisterium, expressed by pastoral teaching which changes daily, and has its *regula fidei* in the subject of the authority and not in the object of the transmitted truth.” That Cardinal Ouellet speaks of communion with Peter in subjective terms as “better feelings towards the Holy Father” nicely illustrates the point.

De Mattei afterwards offers wise warnings to those who fail to see that “papalotry can come to counterpoising Pope against Pope,” or to “looking for harmony and coexistence” between Benedict and Francis, “imagining a possible division of their roles” (as even Benedict is **said** to have done). Or that it can come to positing two churches instead of one, by way of “that inflated traditionalism, which, while not declaring the vacancy of the Seat of Peter, thinks itself able to kick out of the Church the Pope, cardinals and bishops, and *de facto* reduces the Mystical Body of Christ to a purely spiritual and invisible reality,” thus falling neatly into the trap laid for it. He insists, as we must, that “there is only one Catholic Church, in which today cohabit, in a confused and fragmentary way, different and counterpoised theologies and philosophies,” and that we must speak up – respectfully not disrespectfully – in defense, not of traditionalism, but of the tradition itself. ***For “Tradition comes before the Pope and not the Pope before Tradition.”*** He also supplies a useful analysis of the possibility of a pope falling personally into heresy, and of the situation that must then appertain. Recognizing that possibility, he asserts, “does not mean in any way diminishing the love for and devotion to the Papacy. It means admitting that the Pope is the Vicar, not always impeccable and not

always infallible, of Jesus Christ, [the] only Head of the Mystical Body of the Church.”

Now, this almost suffices in elaboration of the fifth element of the crisis. Almost, but not quite. The argument is important enough to get it right, and there are one or two difficulties with it, theologically, that call for friendly amendments.

Idolatry of the Person and Idolatry of the Office

The first difficulty lies in De Mattei’s claim that “the primacy of Peter constitutes the bedrock on which Jesus Christ instituted His Church, and on which She will remain solid until the end of time” – that, and his further claim that “the fierce war” conducted by the devil against the Church is a war centered on the papacy. It seems to me that, though this appears to be drawn straight from *Pastor Aeternus*, it risks an exaggeration that mirrors, or is mirrored by, the false devotion we are both wanting to address; and that in its own way it hints at two churches, one visible and the other invisible. Jesus Christ, not Peter, is the stone that the builders rejected but that God has made the cornerstone, which is “marvelous in our eyes” (Psa. 118:22f.; cf. Matt. 21:42). Both the visible and the invisible dimensions of the Church are founded on Jesus, as Paul explicitly says, and with him on the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20ff.; cf. Rev. 21:14).

The Church Jesus promised to build, considered in its temporal phase as **the Church militant – temporal and eternal, militant and triumphant, are much better categories than visible and invisible when thinking about the Church** – is built upon upon himself and no other. It is not, in the most important and fundamental sense, built on the primacy of Peter, whether as a person or as the holder of an office and a vocation. The *petra* to which Jesus refers in Matt. 16:18 is certainly not *Petros* the man, as the Rosican element today would have it, nor even *Petros* the office-holder, as De Mattei would have it, nor yet the bare confession (“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!”), as Protestants would have it. Rather this *petra* is the divinely generated missionary dynamic of Peter confessing Christ in and for the whole apostolic college, as every holder of his office is bound to do. It is only in relation to the college that the primacy of Peter comes into play, and only because of its collective vocation and authority to confess Christ truly that the college itself matters. Jesus himself remains both the bedrock of the Church and its architect.

This requires and will receive some elaboration, lest anyone suppose that I mean to contradict *Pastor Aeternus* or *Lumen Gentium*. In response,

however, to the obvious objection that both these documents refer (in the words of the latter at §19) to “the universal Church, which the Lord established on the apostles and built upon blessed Peter, their chief, Christ Jesus Himself being the supreme cornerstone,” and that the natural way to read them is to assume an identification between *petra* and *Petros*, it should be said right here that the assumption may be natural enough, and frequently made, but is nonetheless unsound. *Pastor Aeternus*, to be sure, speaks in its opening paragraph of a visible foundation on the strength and firmness of which “was to be built the eternal temple,” and does so immediately after speaking of Christ instituting in Peter “the permanent principle of both unities [that of the bishops and, consequently, that of the faithful] and their visible foundation.” But it must be borne in mind that *Pastor Aeternus* is appending Matthew 16 to John 17, which is entirely Christological and not at all Petrological, in order to defend the Church from a particular form of attack upon its unity. It is treating, in other words, of the essential role of the Petrine office or primacy in maintaining the unity of the Church militant for which Jesus prayed. That it regards that office as the indispensable principle and foundation of unity *in the matter it is treating* – namely, “the doctrine concerning the 1. institution, 2. permanence and 3. nature of the sacred and apostolic primacy, upon which the strength and coherence of the whole Church depends” – is neither in doubt nor in question. What Vatican II later referred to as *communio hierarchica* is, as both councils maintain, indispensable. The reason it is indispensable is that there should be unity of confession and discipline even where there are differences of contexts and rites. None of this, however, requires a simple equation between *petra* and *Petros* in Matt. 16:18. Indeed it is better sustained, I think, by the richer and more Christological reading proposed above.

Perhaps De Mattei and I are not very far apart, then, since we both see this unity of confession and discipline as under threat again today, this time from Rome itself – a possibility neither Vatican I nor Vatican II considered – through a new and more subtle kind of attack on the Petrine principle and ultimately on Christ himself. But there is something more to consider.

De Mattei goes on to supply us with a quick sketch of the war against the papacy, as it was conducted in modernity overtly and covertly, and of the counter-attack that produced the triumph of Vatican I. He then ***laments the ambiguities of Vatican II*** (we might also lament its **cowardice** in the face of Communism) and of *Lumen Gentium*’s “compromise between the principle of the primacy of Peter and that of the

collegiality of the bishops,” before drawing the following curiously inverted analogy, which suggests that the Petrine office is the visible Church’s procreative principle and the apostolic college its unitive principle:

That which took place with *Lumen Gentium* also occurred with the conciliar constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, which placed on the same level the two ends of matrimony: procreative and unitive. Equality in nature does not exist. One of the two principles is destined to assert itself over the other. And, as is the case in matrimony, the unitive principle prevailed over the procreative, so in the case of the constitution of the Church, the principle of collegiality is imposing itself on that of the Primacy of the Roman Pontiff. Synodality, collegiality, decentralization are the words which today express the attempt to transform the monarchical and hierarchical constitution of the Church into a democratic and parliamentary structure.

This attempt at a democratic transformation he traces into the program of Francis and his advisers, who seek “a renewed Papacy, conceived as a form of ministry at the service of the other churches, renouncing the juridical Primacy or government of Peter” in a “transition from a juridical Church to a sacramental Church, a Church of communion.”

De Mattei’s contention is that the purely sacramental church of Pope Francis has no real place for the Petrine ministry, since the latter is “not a sacrament, but an office.” It therefore dissolves the primacy of Peter and, with it, the visibility of the Church. (As the Preliminary Explanatory Note to *Lumen Gentium* insists, “without hierarchical communion the sacramental-ontological function, which is to be distinguished from the canonico-juridical aspect, *cannot* be exercised.”) Of course it needs a false primacy in place of the true, a Rosican primacy, a primacy of the man. By way of correction, De Mattei reminds us that “true devotion to the Chair of Peter is not the worship of the man who occupies this Cathedra, but is the love and veneration for the mission which Jesus Christ gave to Peter and to his successors.” This mission “is a visible mission, perceptible to the senses,” but the innovators of the Francis reformation are stripping it of its concreteness and its visibility, quite effectively “renouncing what is essential to its mission” (*UUS* 95). One of the better accounts of that stripping and renunciation, I will add, is provided by Roberto Pertici in

The End of “Roman Catholicism.” Anyone who doubts that it is taking place would do well to read both articles.

Here we seem to be very much on the same page, though it bears mentioning that there are three ecclesial dimensions to which to attend, not two only: the evangelico-magisterial, the ontologico-sacramental, and the juridico-canonical. In the Bergoglio attempt to “help the Church acquire her natural polyhedral shape” (2018 *Instrumentum laboris*, 10, 177), such that one face of the Church need not look much like another, it is not just the juridical that is suffering. All three dimensions are suffering, especially the evangelical, which “among the principal duties of bishops ... occupies an eminent place” (LG 25). Still, it is the juridical with which we are at present concerned, and though we are on the same page there are some discrepancies in our respective scripts that worry me. De Mattei claims that, “like her Founder, the Church consists in a human element, visible and external, and a Divine element, spiritual and invisible.” But the divine element is not merely spiritual and invisible, nor is the human element merely visible and external. This is not true of Jesus Christ, who is of one being with the Father, and cannot be true of the Church either, which “by no weak analogy” may be compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word (LG 8). De Mattei comes to the conclusion that the pope “is he in whom this visibility of the Church is concentrated and condensed.” Not so. The visibility of the Church, as much as the invisibility, is concentrated and condensed in its cornerstone, Jesus Christ. And while Jesus’ *parousia* is awaited it is concentrated for us in the eucharistic sacrifice by which we anticipate that wonderful event (LG 50).

Again, this is not to deny what the councils have asserted. “The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful,” as the individual bishops “are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches” (LG 23; cf. CCC 880–87). It is, however, to insist that what we are talking about when we talk about the primacy of Peter is precisely the *unio collegialis*. It is “in order that the episcopate itself might be one and undivided” that Christ “placed Blessed Peter over the other apostles, and instituted in him a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion” (LG 18, following PA). This is for the sake of all the faithful, certainly, but it is the *unio collegialis* that is, so to say, solidified in the successor of Peter the confessor.

As I observed in *Ascension Theology* (8off.), refusal to acknowledge the concreteness of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist leads Protestants to disallow in principle what the Orthodox disallow only in

practice; namely, that the Church “is subject to a particular discipline,” that it is Petrine. If there were no Petrine office, no steward of the keys in service of the King (cf. Isa. 22:22), there would indeed be no visible principle and foundation of unity in the Church capable of lending it the integrity of confession and discipline that Protestantism necessarily and manifestly lacks. But we must not read more into the papacy than that. The pope is steward of the keys, and this undoubtedly belongs to the visibility of the Church. His use of those keys lends definition to the Church through the regular process of rendering judgments as well as through speaking to and for her. **But we must be very cautious in claiming that he concentrates in himself what belongs to the Church, whether evangelically, ontologically, or juridically, for it belongs to Jesus Christ himself to do that (Col. 1:15–20), not to the bishop of Rome or any other bishop.** We may allow the Ignatian maxim that where the bishop is, there is the Church, and *a fortiori* that where the pope is, there is the Church, because Christ causes the unity of the Church militant to be served through the visible and tangible fact of the episcopal and papal office. But how are we to think of those offices and of that service? “Exercising within the limits of their authority the function of Christ as Shepherd and Head, they gather together God’s family as a brotherhood all of one mind, and lead them in the Spirit, through Christ, to God the Father. In the midst of the flock they adore Him in spirit and in truth. Finally, they labor in word and doctrine, believing what they have read and meditated upon in the law of God, teaching what they have believed, and putting in practice in their own lives what they have taught” (LG 23; cf. 27).

This brings us back to that curious analogy by which the Petrine primacy becomes the Church’s procreative principle. There is a sense, albeit a secondary one, in which Peter-confessing-Christ may be deemed the Church’s procreative principle; in witness of that, Acts 2 suffices. But De Mattei wants to press this into a parallel between Christ as the invisible guide of the Church and the pontiff as visible guide. Which again is false. **The invisible guide of the Church is the Holy Spirit, and it has no visible guide other than Christ himself.** The King is on a journey; he has gone to the Father to prepare for us a new dwelling place, a new or renewed creation; he will return when that work is accomplished. Meanwhile the Church has her scriptures and creeds; she has her bishops and her pastors. Chief among those is the steward of the keys and of the integrity of her gospel. To say that is to say enough, though of course it is the business of councils to elaborate and apply that where necessary.

Do not think this the mere quibble of a theologian with an historian, an unwarranted quibble since we are both opposing the papalotry of the **Francis reformation**. It matters quite fundamentally to the analysis and to the objection to papal personalism. De Mattei seems here to have his own “clericalism of one” – or that of Joseph de Maistre, to whom he appeals. ***If Jesus is the invisible guide of the Church, then the pope may be the visible guide. If Jesus is the divine ground of the Church, the pope may be (pro tempore, at least) the human ground. And this is wrong, wrong in almost the same way that the reasoning of those who are doing their level best to follow Francis – to follow him despite the fact that he is leading them down the path to dissolution of the visible Church – is wrong.*** God the Father is the procreative principle of the Church, as of every family in heaven and on earth (Eph. 3:14ff.). He is its first and its final cause. **The incarnate Son is the divine and human ground of the Church, of the new humanity that will live forever in God, and the head of the mystical body.** He is its material cause. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives form and vitality to the Church, and its counselor (John 15:26). He is the efficient and perfecting cause of the Church, in its visibility as in its invisibility. And the pope? Neither in his own person, nor yet *ex officio*, is he what De Mattei and De Maistre make him out to be. He is neither the *fons et origo* of the Church as a human institution (which already exists in the calling and commissioning of the Twelve; cf. *PA* 3 and *LG* 19) nor ordinarily its guide and leading light (even in Peter’s day, the leading light was probably Paul), though he is both confessor-in-chief and steward of the keys. Certainly he is not, as De Maistre contends, the creative or unifying principle of authentic human civilization, though that is an argument for another day.

In brief, I worry that there is an idolatry of the office at work in this attempt to overcome idolatry of the person. If there is, we need another way to confront the latter and to develop or recover a sound respect for the Chair of Peter. There are powerful acids at work dissolving the institutional lineaments of the Church, and the current idolatry of the person is one of those acids. But we should not aim at neutralizing those acids by reprimating a view of the papal office that was tried and found wanting.

That is what Cardinal Newman sought to warn us against when the Church was fighting a different idolatry, that of nationalism. Newman, like Cardinal Manning and the fathers of Vatican I, knew that the Church needed to reassert her unique mandate and authority. But he also knew how unsustainable was the papal overreach that appeared from time to

time in the past millennium, punctuated, as it was, by devastating collapses. (Both the overreach and the collapse are nicely illustrated by Boniface VIII, but more important and more recent examples can be supplied.) Vatican I had to defend the papacy against Gallicanism and other forms of nationalist idolatry that were threatening to ruin the Church by taking it captive to human and even to demonic agendas. Its defenses still stand, and they can and should be held against the globalist and inclusivist idolatry – the pseudo-Catholicism of the new anti-colonial colonialists – that threatens the Church today. What is happening instead is that the latter has penetrated the Church’s defenses as far as Rome itself. But is that, as De Mattei seems to believe, because Vatican II dismantled the defenses? Or is it because the Church is still being tested in regard to the real object of its faith?

From the *Dictatus Papae* to the Dictator Pope

The proper object of the Church’s faith is definitely not the pope. If it were, we could accept Cardinal Ouellet’s apparent equation of communion with “better feelings towards the Holy Father” and humble submission to his agenda. **The real object of its faith, we agree, is the Holy Trinity.** And should we not admit just here (parenthetically, but purposefully) that the very title, Holy Father, contains a temptation to idolatry of the office, if not indeed of the person? That, after all, is the title used by Jesus in John 17 for God himself, when he prayed over his disciples that they might be one.

Of course, that is not how we came to use it of the pope! All bishops in the apostolic succession, being charged with discerning and declaring the truth of the Catholic faith in their own time and place, are fathers in God to their own flocks and as such “holy fathers,” even if that title, as a formal one, is normally reserved for them when they deliberate and speak in concert at Church councils. In the midst of them, both when they gather and when they are dispersed, as the visible and abiding sign of their unity in the truth, stands the bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, who first confessed Christ. For that reason he is regarded as *the* holy father, a regard that has carried over into an official title and form of address. But particularly after Gregory VII and the *Dictatus Papae* program to eliminate any serious competition from other patriarchs to papal dignity and authority, this form of address has carried with it the risk of contradicting our Lord himself. For the same Lord who committed to Peter the keys, generating a peculiar stewardship of the Church’s confession and discipline, also said that we are to call no man on earth our father, meaning that we

are not to ascribe the kind of authority to any man, himself excepted, that belongs to God. “For you have one Father, who is in heaven,” as “you have one teacher” and “one master, the Christ” (Matt. 23:8–10). This is a warning against both kinds of idolatry.

The warning was not meant to be taken literally, nor was it. Whether in the home or in the civic sphere or in the Church itself, people were and are addressed by such titles of respect. To learn with Jesus to call God “Father” is not to unlearn the language of “our father Abraham.” To learn in the Holy Spirit to say “Jesus is Lord” is not to decline to specify any lesser lords. (Archbishop Coleridge, who appears to be drunk on democracy, has this **backwards**.) It does, however, require us to reckon with the fact that language for God is analogical and that “between the Creator and the creature so great a likeness cannot be noted without the necessity of noting a still greater unlikeness,” as the fathers of Lateran IV put it. Properly speaking, then, the title in question belongs *only* to the Father in heaven, and is given him by the one person who truly knows what it means (Matt. 11:27; conversely, cf. 16:17). Great care must be taken with any other use of it, especially with its use for the bishop of Rome, since in his case the iconic function of bishops is at its most potent. **Christians, we must be clear, do not owe any bishop unqualified loyalty or allegiance, any more than they owe unqualified obedience to their natural parents.** Honor your father and your mother. Honor also the king. And by all means honor the pope. But unqualified obedience can rightly be rendered to God and his Christ alone.

On this point, De Mattei is admirably clear, but the Latin tradition has not always been clear. When we read of the Roman pontiff in the *Dictatus Papae* that “his name alone shall be spoken in the churches,” that “this is the only name in the world,” that “he who is not at peace with the Roman Church shall not be considered ‘catholic,’” and the like, are we not seeing signs of a growing papalotry, of a growing confusion between the person and the office, and indeed between the kingly and priestly office of Christ and the office of steward that he assigned to Peter? Or when we turn to an authoritative source such as the Council of Florence, bearing in mind that all is in support of a hoped-for (though unachieved) reunion of the Church and of Christendom, do we not find, even there, language that must carefully be hedged round?

We also define that the holy apostolic see and the Roman pontiff holds the primacy over the whole world and the Roman pontiff is the successor of blessed Peter prince of

the apostles, and that he is the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole church and the father and teacher of all Christians, and to him was committed in blessed Peter the full power of tending, ruling and governing the whole church, as is contained also in the acts of ecumenical councils and in the sacred canons. (Tanner, DEC 1: 528; cf. *PA* 3.1, 4.2.)

The language that needs hedging, here as in *Pastor Aeternus*, is that of **headship**. For the Church cannot have two heads without becoming a monstrosity. **And it cannot have a head in heaven, Jesus Christ, and a head on earth, the vicar of Christ, as if the heavenly Church were one thing and the earthly Church something else.** Raphael's *La Disputa* is instructive: In heaven the Church is gathered round Christ in his glorified humanity; on earth the Church is gathered round the sacred host, Christ made present in a mystery. **It is not gathered round the pope, who like everyone else, despite his exalted station, is a communicant subject to the judgment and mercy of Christ.**

To say that the pope is not the object of the Church's faith is also to say (*pace* Boniface in *Unam sanctam*) that he is not the head of Catholics in the one sense that ultimately matters: being members of the mystical body of Christ and children of the Father in heaven. Only in two distant analogical senses is he the head of Catholics: the pastoral sense, in which (as Florence says) he is, in principle at least, the father and teacher of all Christians and not merely of his own diocesan family; and the juridical or institutional sense, in which is the head of the apostolic college. Neither Vatican II nor current canon law compromises either of these latter senses:

The bishop of the Roman Church, in whom continues the office given by the Lord uniquely to Peter, the first of the Apostles, and to be transmitted to his successors, is the head of the college of bishops, the Vicar of Christ, and the pastor of the universal Church on earth. By virtue of his office he possesses supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power in the Church, which he is always able to exercise freely. (Canon 331)

What Vatican II does do in *Lumen Gentium* is what had to be done, both with Peter and with Mary, for it could not be done with one only of these. Just as it does not let Mariology loose from Christology or

ecclesiology, it does not let Petrology loose either. It is careful not to let the vicar of Christ become a principle independent of the *unio collegialis*. Otherwise put: **It does not let him become the epiphany of Christ, as Christ is the epiphany of the Father.** This was a real threat, renewed after Vatican I, just as unbridled Marianism was a real threat, renewed after the promulgation of the Marian dogmas.

I am only a theologian and not a proper historian, and I am only engaged here in the work of a friendly amendment (at least that is how I see it), but I will dare to put a sharp question, albeit only in the form of an illustration, to those who think that we used to have a view of the papacy that was just about right: Was it not by the smoke of Satan that we grew so confused as to employ Caesar's *sedes gestatoria* to exalt the Roman pontiff, as if he were the very epiphany of Christ, indeed, of Christ seated in heaven? Is the answer to Francis's immodest papal modesty the restoration of the *sedes* or at least of the thinking behind it? Better the pope should be carried around on a cross. Better yet, we should leave both the cross and the throne to him to whom they belong! **Stewards are merely stewards, and the original steward expressed that, tradition tells us, when he asked to be crucified upside down.**

Though, like every priest, the pontiff acts sacramentally *in persona Christi*, and though like every bishop he is an icon of the heavenly Father, and though the Holy See, by virtue of his vicariate, is answerable to no higher authority among men, he is not Christ made manifest and must not be viewed or treated as such. Moreover, his participation in the royal priesthood of Christ is not of a different kind than that of any other Christian. Nor is his participation in the episcopal order of a different kind than that of any other diocesan bishop, though their exercise of the episcopacy rests on his concurrent exercise. His authority is greater, to be sure, for the authority of the Church on earth comes to rest with Peter, when it does not come to rest earlier. But the one who tries to make of Peter something more than this risks making of him an antichrist. It is only in his possession of the keys, hence in the global reach of his ordinary power, that he differs from other bishops, and in his capacity, formally recognized at Vatican I, to speak *ex cathedra* with the Church's charism of infallibility. And even there a caveat stands, as De Mattei rightly insists. **He may not exercise it arbitrarily or in contradiction of its prior exercise, for the magisterium of the Church is a single teaching office, and "this teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully**

in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed” (DV 10; cf. LG 25).

I agree with De Mattei that this caveat has never been more important, for (despite the *saeculum obscurum* of the tenth century and the Great Schism of the fourteenth and other dark times) **never before have we endured a pope who, qua pope, sits so loosely to established doctrinal and moral judgments of the Church, refusing to guard them scrupulously and quite evidently favoring change.** In the pontificate of Francis we have already witnessed three synods and numerous personal statements and actions designed to relax those judgments, all under what John Paul II called the sign of mercy (cf. *UUS* 93). The problem we face today, however, does not lie in a pontiff determined to complete the work of Vatican II, and of his immediate predecessors, by seeking a more modest papacy and a more modest Church. **It lies rather in a pontiff apparently quite willing to ignore Vatican II and his predecessors where it is convenient to do so, and to expand, rather than contract, papal power over both doctrine and practice, on the way to that relaxed, indeed, deracinated Church and papacy that the St-Gallen plans called for.** Which in its own odd way confirms that reform was and is needed. It has been needed, I think, for a very long time. Without detracting from Gregory VII’s achievements, the path marked out in the *Dictatus Papae* did not provide a solid foundation for the unity of the Church and for its good governance. Despite the fact that the Church has been blessed with many fine popes and some wonderfully productive pontificates, not to speak of the remarkable achievements of its modern councils, it has not yet managed, on that path, to make of the papacy the instrument of unity it ought to be. John Paul II said as much in *Ut unum sint*. So the question is: **what kind of reform do we really need?**

Towards a more Petrine Papacy

The Bergolian reform is not a reform so much as a revolution. To be sure, it takes its cue for what it calls the “conversion” of the papacy from *Ut unum sint*, to which appeal is made in *Evangelii gaudium*. Yet it has been clear from the start that its larger goal is to dissolve the neo-Vatican synthesis of the last four pontificates along with the remains of the older Tridentine form of Catholicism, which under Leo

XIII (as George Weigel argued in a recent Newman lecture at McGill) was already giving way to something more attuned to the changed circumstances of the modern world. Its vision for the future of the papacy can be debated, but the current papalotry of the person it promotes – “I belong to Francis!” – is plainly in service of a radical downgrading of the office itself.

De Mattei, Pertici, et al., are on solid ground when they claim that **“Who am I to judge?” signals the deliberate abandonment of a function proper to the Petrine office, a refusal of the power of the keys.** For the **context** of the question and the answer was the scandal over Msgr Ricca and the “gay lobby” inside the Church, to which it is not CCC 2358 that applies but rather the last line of **2357**, together with **1 Cor. 5**, which explicitly mandates judgment inside the Church, as do the relevant disciplinary canons. Now, muddling contexts is something we are all guilty of on occasion, and it sometimes happens with the best of intentions. In this pontificate, however, it is difficult to avoid the impression of a pattern and even a **program**. Authority comes to rest with Peter all right; only Peter authoritatively says that authority must never come to rest. He is free, therefore, to stand above scripture and tradition in such judgments as he does choose to make. He is free even to renounce, for all practical purposes, things once universally regarded as essential. Meanwhile, “the duty to admonish, to caution and to declare at times that this or that opinion being circulated is irreconcilable with the unity of faith” (*UUS* 94), becomes the duty to defend the revolution from its critics.

At the heart of the revolution formally – that is, strategically – is “synodality” or the quest for the Church’s “natural polyhedral shape.” **The papacy is to be converted by a transfer of papal responsibility and authority to episcopal synods, which will then be free to walk their own path without worrying about what other particular churches have to say.** The papal role will be that of a more or less neutral referee, though the rules of the game have yet to be declared. Here we need the requisite texts in front of us, beginning with John Paul’s, for they need to be compared and contrasted:

When the Catholic Church affirms that the office of the Bishop of Rome corresponds to the will of Christ, she does not separate this office from the mission entrusted to the whole body of Bishops, who are also ‘vicars and ambassadors of Christ’. The Bishop of Rome is a member of the ‘College’, and the Bishops are his brothers in the

ministry. *Whatever relates to the unity of all Christian communities clearly forms part of the concerns of the primacy.* As Bishop of Rome I am fully aware, as I have reaffirmed in the present Encyclical Letter, that Christ ardently desires the full and visible communion of all those Communities in which, by virtue of God's faithfulness, his Spirit dwells. *I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.* For a whole millennium Christians were united in 'a brotherly fraternal communion of faith and sacramental life ... *If disagreements in belief and discipline arose among them, the Roman See acted by common consent as moderator*'. *In this way the primacy exercised its office of unity (UUS 95, emphasis added).*

And now Francis:

Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy. It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelization. Pope John Paul II asked for help in finding 'a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation'. We have made little progress in this regard. The papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion. The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position 'to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit'. *Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions,*

including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated. Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach" (EG 32, emphasis added).

These texts, at first glance, seem very much in continuity, but in one crucial respect they are not. In *Ut unum sint*, as in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, there is no thought of a magisterial referee who leaves unresolved, within the full communion of the Church, "disagreements in belief and discipline" that arise between particular churches or regional synods – not where those disagreements touch on the unity of faith and morals that the pope is obliged to protect. But that is just what the Bergoglian reform intends by promising a new juridical status to those synods. What we are talking about is Gallicanism by another name, or denominationalism under another label.

At the heart of the revolution materially, on the other hand, is so-called sexual liberation, which is why the revolutionaries want nothing to do with John Paul II's theology of the body or with talk about chastity, as the recent synod again demonstrated. It is also why clericalism is fingered as the sole cause of the sexual scandals. God forbid that any admission should be made that disordered sexual desires are at work in the scandals, for the revolution is devoted to suppressing the very notion of disordered desires. Yet there is indeed a clericalism at work, both in the creation of the scandals and in the attempt to suppress as far as possible **further discussion** of them. This was very much on display in Cardinal Ouellet's letter, which (beyond the McCarrick business) managed only to admit "the fact that there could be in the Vatican persons who practice or support sexual behavior that is contrary to the values of the Gospel." What kind of fact, we may ask, is a hypothetical? What if anything ought to be done about it, if it is not just hypothetical? In the face of present **reports** from the Vatican and what Archbishop Viganò has called the **plague** of homosexuality among the clergy, this is, quite frankly, an appalling dodge. And what exactly is meant by "gospel values" anyway? Not much, it seems, or at all events nothing very like what Paul said to the Thessalonians:

You know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as

we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.” (1 Thess. 4:1–8)

Alas, many do disregard it – disregard God! – inside as well as outside the Vatican. That much is evident. Some indeed are taught to disregard it by clerics who reason that Paul was not fully aware of “the risk of becoming enclosed in an elitist and judgmental group,” a risk that “was already a major temptation in the circle of Jesus’ disciples” (IL 176) and certainly in his own prior Pharisaical circles. Perhaps we can allow that **Paul had “a basic awareness of the existence of other lifestyles,” but we can hardly look to him for “a deliberate effort towards their inclusion”** (IL 26; cf. Rom. 1:18ff.). For he did not yet grasp the role of conscience, which “helps us to see what gifts we can offer and what contributions we can bring, even if not completely up to the standard of our ideals“ (IL 116). He did not yet know that “realities are greater than ideas” and that listening to people “in the real circumstances of their lives” is the best way to discern the call of the Spirit (IL 4). He did not understand that “in free and open societies, in which different identities need to engage in dialogue, closed ideologies make no sense” (IL 149). No, today it is not the traditions handed on by St Paul we require, or by St Peter either for that matter. We require a renovated view of human sexuality that will not merely justify a great deal of what used to be regarded as immoral but also demand a conversion of the very concept of morality. For in the polyhedral Church neither doctrine nor discipline nor “gospel values” will be quite what they were, once upon a time. And the anti-magisterial will be said to be magisterial.

But enough. **The critics are right that the revolution is wrong. This is not reform; it is not even conversion. It is conquest.** If it is not stopped, the gates of Hades will prevail against the Church, which will die out everywhere just as it is dying out in the lands of the revolutionaries themselves. We must appeal to Heaven to stop it and be prepared to help stop it, confident in our Lord’s promise that those gates shall not prevail and that his Church will not fail. But that begs the question as to the kind of reform we ought, with Heaven’s help, to be looking for. Shall we, too, judge what I have called the neo-Vatican synthesis something inherently unstable and the work of Vatican II irredeemably flawed? After all, the revolutionaries themselves agree with De Mattei that this synthesis, with its hermeneutic of continuity, won’t do. To them it is nothing more than an

unfortunate interlude – a spell, so to say, in a half-way house – before the work of Vatican II could be resumed. Shall we hold out, instead, for a restoration of something like the old Tridentine Catholicism that the council fathers accidentally or deliberately let slip? If not, what sort of reform should we look for? Either way, of course, **we cannot assume that the revolution will be defeated at the next conclave and true reform undertaken.** We may labour and pray for that, but those in favor of the revolution are many and the rota of cardinal electors continues to be revised. Our resolve may be tested a good while longer, so **it is best to be as certain as possible what it is that we are resolved on.**

For my part, I do not think we should try to reverse course to Trent, or even to Vatican I. It is a Protestant way of thinking to suppose that we can go backward in history rather than forward, just as it is a Protestant way of thinking to suppose that moving forward means endless revolution. I do not believe that Vatican II was Protestant in either sense, though we know all too well that both kinds of Protestantism were in play then and that the latter is in play now. Moreover, if Tridentine Catholicism were itself as stable as its proponents suppose it to be, if it were adequate not only to the post-Reformation period but to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment era and to every subsequent era – if Trent was the end of history and its prayer book the end of prayer books – how and why did it give way to the changes that overtook it? Why, like the reforms of Gregory VII and of Florence, was it followed, sooner or later, by great disasters and schisms? As for those who want to say that Vatican II was not a genuine council at all, because it perversely allowed that imbalances and imperfections and dangers of various kinds still existed, together with new challenges and opportunities that required adjustments, they are difficult to distinguish from sedevacantists. **Behind the question, then, as to what kind of reform is needed, there remain other stubborn questions.** What did the council really aim at? Where did the last four pontificates succeed, and where did they fail, in carrying forward that aim? What did they do or fail to do in the face of the determination of others – both during the council and afterwards – to throw the switch, as Francis has now done, that would send the Church down another track altogether, the track to heterodoxy and to the Sacred Polyhedron?

These are questions I am not fully competent to answer. I will venture to say, however, that any attempt to decide what kind of reform is needed must take into account that **the larger ecclesial crisis we face is a crisis of morals even before it is a crisis of doctrine or of ecclesial institutions.** *The truths reprised in Humanae vitae and*

Veritatis splendor have been and are being rejected, not for doctrinal reasons – though there are false anthropologies and heretical theologies at play in their rejection – but for personal reasons, reasons primarily of sexual license and especially of homosexual license. Here we must not forget that “standing fast” includes, and has always included, adherence to the biblico-dominical moral tradition and to the liturgico-doxological tradition of the ancient Church. Abandon either of those, and doctrinal traditions are sure to be abandoned as well, leading eventually to a full-blown crisis of authority. It follows that the first step towards reform must be a decisive step towards both moral and liturgical discipline. God must once again be honored and obeyed as God – that, and nothing less, is right and just! It is the common failing of recent pontiffs that they did not take such a step but, even in the matter of episcopal appointments and the selection of cardinals, permitted the drift into corruption to continue. So long as this corruption remains, no authentic reform is possible.

It must also take into account what has happened in the present pontificate, which has already succeeded in changing the way the papacy is conceived. Bergoglio, it seems, did not intend to be just another pope; he intended that there never would be such again. Will there be? Should there be? After Francis, can there be? Immoral popes and pompous popes and scheming political popes and incompetent or badly misguided popes, and even anti-popes, there have been aplenty; but a pope who says, “Who am I to judge?” – who deliberately mislays the keys? And yet he is the pope; of that he wants us to be clear. Is he the exception that proves the rule, or is he the exception that proves the rule revoked? Or perhaps this is a false alternative. Perhaps he is the exception that shows us that our understanding of the rule has been faulty; that we need a fresh way of thinking about what it means to be keeper of the keys and confessor-in-chief.

On my view, that is just what we need – only not the fresh thinking he is offering us, which is all *aggiornamento* and no *ressourcement*, all conversion rather than reform. We need to return to the Scriptures and the fathers for a better vision of the Petrine ministry; that is, to the sources the St Gallen group (I do not say Francis himself) learned to despise. This vision will have room in it for the example set by the likes of Leo the Great and Gregory the Great, or for that matter Leo XIII and John Paul II, but it will not be a vision that relies on outstanding gifts and energy. It will not need Peter to be Paul, as it were, or even to be the Peter of Acts 2. It will be a vision rather of a papacy, and of popes, styled primarily on the Peter of

his two epistles, which ought to be read and expounded and pondered at the next conclave in their entirety.

The Peter we meet there, of course, knows nothing of Christendom or the end of Christendom. He has never thought about how “the Vatican” should negotiate “the modern world;” indeed, he has never heard of either. But he does know that our age is but a watch in the night and that the day of the Lord will come upon it like a thief (2 Pet. 3:8–13). **He knows how to confess Christ in the meanwhile, how to tend the flock through proclamation of the gospel of Christ, and how to name and rebuke lawlessness and moral corruption. He also knows that neither he nor his fellow bishops and presbyters are anything more than witnesses to Christ on temporary assignment over assigned portions of his flock. His vision of his own office is a modest one, but he is not modest about the gospel it serves or the kingdom it announces.**

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory. (1 Pet. 5:1–4).

Were Peter himself to be returned to us and take his own chair in St Peter’s, I fancy he would read to us his second epistle, supplemented perhaps by a few reflections on Acts 5, and then act accordingly. “The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God, and if it begins with us...” (2 Pet. 4:17). He would probably dismantle a good deal of the Vatican machinery, not being content with John Paul II’s disposal of the *sedes gestatoria*. He would certainly drive out from his own house (as John Paul II did not or could not) those “who secretly bring in destructive heresies” and those who “have hearts trained in greed” or “entice unsteady souls” (2 Pet. 2:1ff.), even if he had to appeal to God to use a “speechless donkey” to get the job done.

I have not forgotten that we cannot go backward in history, and I am not saying that Peter *redivivus* would or could ignore what has been achieved in two millennia of Christianity. I am not proposing a reform that

is, in its own way, a down-grading of the papal office. I am proposing that **the reform we need is in the direction of simplicity, transparency, and integrity** – what many thought we were getting in Francis, before discovering otherwise – and that whatever does not serve directly the task of the successor of Peter should be marginalized or eliminated. That task is not so very difficult to delineate. It is the responsibility of the pope to guard the faith and to protect the integrity of the sacraments, first in his own diocese – which pontiffs for far too long have not served in a direct or intimate way – and then through the exercise of oversight in the college of bishops and, occasionally, in ecumenical councils. It is not his responsibility to be pastor to the planet, which he can be only by selling his papal soul to the media devil. It is not his responsibility even to choose bishops, though he has the right to choose and depose bishops. His responsibility is to see that bishops who are “carried away with the error of lawless men and lose [their] own stability” (2 Pet. 3:17) are disciplined effectively or else replaced, lest the unity of the Church in essential matters of faith and morals be compromised.

This for a millennium was how popes were regarded and, when willing and able, functioned, despite some sorry (even sordid) exceptions. As for being “the head of the whole church and the father and teacher of all Christians,” with “the full power of tending, ruling and governing the whole church,” we have no good reason, even with chapter three of *Pastor Aeternus* clearly in view, to apply this Florentine determination in any more expansive or ambitious way. **It is by making too much of the papal office that we have ended up making too little of it, even electing a pontiff who gives every appearance of combining these mistakes; that is, who allows *communio* to be converted into uncritical adulation of his own person while converting his office into that of referee between the orthodox and the heterodox in the looming wars of “synodality.”**

And whom do I imagine carrying out a proper reform of the papacy? No one, if not a man like Peter, a man who knows that chains can fall away (even chains forged deep in the Vatican bureaucracy) and locked doors be opened. If such a man cannot be found among those at the next conclave, the members of that conclave should break with the extra-canonical tradition of selecting one of their own number, and select another who is evident to all as such a man. For the office may be greater than the man, but the office nevertheless requires the man.



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