

*Fr. Perozich comments—*

*When statements are ambiguous they may be interpreted in different ways. Those who are in charge of organizations can impose their own interpretations upon their subjects.*

*When statements are clear, they do not allow different interpretations. Those who are in charge of organizations can propose the truth upon their subjects.*

*Peter Kwasniewski calls for clarity in church teachings and for the removal of ambiguity in the statements of the second Vatican council.*

## **The Long Shadow of Vatican II: Ambiguity as Ecclesial Cancer**

Peter Kwasniewski



*By the Canon of Shaftesbury*

On February 8, Bishop Bernard Fellay of the Society of Saint Pius X delivered a sermon in which he spoke of the necessity for the Society to consecrate new bishops. The purpose of this piece is not to address the merits or challenges of that decision, but rather to focus on some of the problems he identified as plaguing the Church today and how these flow from a reading of the Second Vatican Council that has led to profound confusion—confusion that was aggravated by Pope Francis.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) stands as one of the most consequential events in Catholic history. Called by Saint John XXIII to open the windows of the Church to the modern world, it produced sixteen documents that addressed everything from liturgy to religious freedom. Yet more than sixty years later, the Council remains a source of profound controversy—not primarily because of what it explicitly taught, but *because of what it left unclear*.

**The problem isn't that Vatican II was heretical. The problem is that it was ambiguous.** And in that ambiguity, we've seen the seeds of confusion that have flowered into some of the most troubling theological developments in modern Church history. When a Council's language can be interpreted in ways that seem to contradict two thousand years of consistent teaching, something has gone seriously wrong.

This isn't an argument against ecumenical councils or legitimate doctrinal development. It's an argument for clarity. Because when the Church speaks in vague terms, even if unintentionally, then souls are at stake.

## **The Nature of the Problem: Ambiguity as Rupture**

Vatican II presented itself as a pastoral council, not a dogmatic one. This distinction matters. The Council fathers

claimed they weren't defining new dogmas but rather expressing perennial truths in a way the modern world could hear. This seems noble enough and praiseworthy. But here's the problem: when you prioritize pastoral tone over doctrinal precision, you risk saying

Take the phrase "subsistit" (subsists in) from *Lumen Gentium*. The Council declared that the Church of Christ "subsists in" the Catholic Church, rather than using the traditional formulation that the Church of Christ "is" the Catholic Church. Theologians have been arguing ever since about what "subsists in" actually means. Does it suggest that the Church of Christ exists in some imperfect way in other Christian communities? Or is it simply a more nuanced way of saying the same thing Catholics always believed? The fact that we're still debating this sixty years later tells you everything you need to know about the dangers of ambiguity.

Both Cardinal Ratzinger and Cardinal Betti defended the phrase by arguing that this phrase explains the elements of grace found outside the Church. Fair enough, one can argue that there are elements of grace that manifest outside the visible communion of the Catholic Church. At the same time the phrase also contains the seeds of confusion, for to the untrained eye the phrase weakens the nature of the Church as the sole institution founded by Christ. Perhaps at the time of the Council another phrase could have been used to explain this and not risk the problem of ambiguity.

The Council's defenders argue that this kind of language represents legitimate doctrinal development in the sense that Saint John Henry Newman described: an organic unfolding of truth that remains faithful to the deposit of faith. But Newman's criteria for authentic development included preservation of type, continuity of principles, and logical sequence from prior teaching. When a 'development' seems to contradict what came before, or when it requires decades of theological gymnastics to reconcile

with previous magisterial teaching, we have to ask: Is this development, or is it rupture disguised as development?

Nowhere is the problem more evident than in *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Council's declaration on religious freedom. This document asserts that every person has a right to religious liberty: that the state should not coerce anyone in matters of religion. On its face, this sounds reasonable, even obviously true to modern ears. But it creates a serious problem when placed alongside previous papal teaching.

However, it must be noted that the Catholic Church does not, unlike other religions, force conversions at the point of a sword. The problem here again is the phraseology and the problems of interpretation and ambiguity. Read from a certain vantage point, the text of *Dignitatis Humanae* falls into the problems outlined by Pope Gregory XVI in *Mirari Vos* (1832), where the ideas, if not carefully explained by some linguistic pirouette, lead one to the indifferentism criticized by the Pope.

This is further asserted in the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) of Pope Pius IX, where in his condemnations of indifferentism and latitudinarianism he condemns the proposition that "every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true" (no. 15). And the challenge is that these weren't casual airplane interviews or offhand remarks. No, these were solemn papal pronouncements on matters of faith and morals.

So what happened at Vatican II? Did the Church suddenly realize that Gregory XVI and Pius IX were wrong? Did truth change? Or is *Dignitatis Humanae* compatible with prior teaching in some way that requires extensive explanation?

Fr. John Courtney Murray, one of the principal architects and commentators of *Dignitatis Humanae*, recognized the problem. He admitted that the document represented a development of doctrine that 'remains to be explained by the magisterium.' This is a serious problem. One of the document's

own authors acknowledged that it needed further clarification to demonstrate its continuity with tradition. That's not a minor footnote; it's a confession that the Council left a doctrinal issue in very ambiguous terms.

The problem isn't just academic. If the Church can assert what appears to be a 'right to error' in religious matters (as critics of *Dignitatis Humanae* claim it does), what becomes of the Church's traditional teaching that error has no rights, only persons have rights? If we're not clear on this, we end up with theological incoherence: affirming both that the Catholic Church possesses the fullness of truth and that religious error deserves positive protection and even encouragement. The ambiguity in *Dignitatis Humanae* opened a Pandora's box. Once you suggest that the state should treat all religions neutrally, it becomes very difficult to maintain that Catholicism is uniquely true in a way that should shape public life. The document tried to thread this needle, but the thread keeps slipping.

Some will defend *Dignitatis Humanae*, arguing through a certain lens that the document addresses different issues than earlier papal teachings. However, this interpretation faces a significant challenge: the confusion the document has created has led many, even within the Church, to abandon belief in the Church's unique role in salvation.

Ultimately, the interpretive key hinges on what exactly the earlier documents condemned and whether *Dignitatis Humanae* addresses the same question or a different one. Fr. Murray claimed continuity with tradition while acknowledging development in understanding human dignity and the limits of state coercion, whereas others, such as Yves Congar, saw the document as materially contrasting with earlier papal teachings.

If Vatican II planted seeds of ambiguity, the decades since have shown us the harvest. The Council's **unclear language has been interpreted in increasingly radical directions, often by people claiming to be faithful to the 'spirit of Vatican**

**II' (a phrase that should set off alarm bells, since it implicitly admits the letter of Vatican II is unclear!).**

We've seen this in liturgy, where the Council's call for 'active participation' and permission for vernacular languages somehow became a license to gut traditional worship and replace it with folk guitars and felt banners.

**We've seen it in ecclesiology**, where the Council's emphasis on the Church as 'People of God' has been used to downplay hierarchical authority and elevate democratic processes that have no place in Catholic tradition.

**We've seen it in missionary activity** of the Church, where the Council's respect for other religions has morphed into a de facto relativism that questions whether anyone really needs to convert to Catholicism at all.

But perhaps nowhere has the trajectory from ambiguity to confusion been more evident than in recent papal pronouncements, particularly those of Pope Francis.

In 2016, Pope Francis issued *Amoris Laetitia*, an apostolic exhortation on marriage and family life. Much of the document contains beautiful reflections on love, marriage, and family. But one section, Chapter 8, particularly footnote 351, unleashed a storm that continues to this day. At the heart the ambiguity lies in the question: Can divorced and civilly remarried Catholics (who have not obtained annulments and thus remain validly married to their first spouses in the eyes of the Church) receive Holy Communion? The Church's teaching has been clear for two millennia: No. Why? Because receiving Communion while living in a state of objective grave sin (which adultery is) profanes the Eucharist and harms the soul of the recipient.

But *Amoris Laetitia* seems to suggest that in some cases, after a process of discernment with a pastor, such couples might be admitted to the sacraments. The language is characteristically vague and ambiguous. Pope Francis spoke of 'integration' and 'accompaniment' and the need to avoid 'rigid' applications of

moral norms. The implication was clear enough that bishops' conferences worldwide interpreted the document differently, some saying nothing had changed while others said divorced and remarried Catholics could receive Communion. The Pope himself declined to clarify when four cardinals formally asked him to do so through the *dubia* process.

In the end, the ambiguity was further compounded by the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Fernández, when in September 2023 he officially reaffirmed the guidelines of the bishops of Argentina. These guidelines stated that there is a path of discernment which can, in specific cases, lead to the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, even if they are not living in complete continence. The guidelines were later published in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (the official publishing office of the Holy See), confirming their significance.

The challenge with this is that this isn't a minor disagreement about pastoral strategy. It touches the indissolubility of marriage: a doctrine that goes back to Christ himself, who said, 'What God has joined together, let no man separate' (Matthew 19:6). If a validly married person can enter a sexual relationship with someone else and still be considered in a state of grace sufficient to receive Communion, what happens to the Church's teaching on adultery? What happens to the permanence of the marriage bond?

The problem, again, is ambiguity.

*Amoris Laetitia* doesn't explicitly reject Church teaching on marriage. But it uses language flexible enough to accommodate interpretations that do. And when different bishops interpret a papal document in contradictory ways: with some saying yes to Communion for the remarried and others saying no. In this then

*the Church is no longer speaks with one voice. Then the faithful are left confused, and confusion is not a gift of the Holy Spirit. Finally, on this point, Cardinal Fernández's interpretation is that this should be done through case-by-case discernment, which leads not only to ambiguity but now also to arbitrariness and casuistry!*

However, it does not end there: in December 2023, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, with Pope Francis's approval, issued *Fiducia Supplicans*, a declaration permitting blessings for 'couples in irregular situations' including same-sex couples. The document insisted these are 'pastoral' blessings, not liturgical ones, and don't constitute approval of the irregular union itself. The distinction proved too subtle for most people to grasp, including many bishops, who publicly refused to implement the document in their dioceses. If a priest can bless a same-sex couple, how is the average Catholic (or non-Catholic observer) supposed to understand that this doesn't mean the Church approves of same-sex relationships?

The Church teaches, based on Scripture and natural law, that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and that same-sex unions cannot be blessed because they involve a commitment to engage in sinful acts. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said exactly this in a 2021 *responsum* that carried Pope Francis's explicit approval: the Church 'does not have, and cannot have, the power to bless unions of persons of the same sex.'

Yet two years later, *Fiducia Supplicans* seemed to say the opposite—or at least, it says something different enough that bishops around the world are in open disagreement about what it means and whether to implement it. Once again, we have ambiguity breeding confusion. And once again, the confusion touches on fundamental moral teachings about human sexuality and marriage.

However, perhaps the most egregious fruit of this confusion is the indifferentism that has taken hold in the Church, a problem that has been aggravated in recent years even by those charged with confirming the faith. In September 2024, during an apostolic visit to Singapore, Pope Francis made comments about religious pluralism that sowed confusion and shock both within the Catholic Church and beyond. There in Singapore, he suggested that the multiplicity of religions is a ‘gift’ and that different faiths are various ‘paths to God’ or ‘languages’ to reach the Divine. He encouraged dialogue over division and emphasized what unites rather than what divides.

On the surface, this sounds charitable, especially for a pluralistic society. But if we dig deeper, and we find a serious problem. If all religions are equally valid paths to God, why did Christ command his apostles to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19)? Why did Peter declare that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)? Why did countless missionaries sacrifice their lives to bring the Gospel to those who didn’t know Christ, if people were already on perfectly good paths to God through their existing religions?

**The traditional Catholic position is clear: while elements of truth and goodness can be found in other religions (as Vatican II itself acknowledged in *Nostra Aetate*), the fullness of truth exists only in the Catholic Church, and salvation comes through Jesus Christ. Other religions may contain partial truths that can serve as preparation for the Gospel but they are not equally valid alternative routes to salvation.**

Yet Pope Francis’s comments in Singapore suggest something else, or at least, they’re ambiguous enough that they can be interpreted as suggesting something else. His defenders argue he was simply emphasizing that God can work through different cultures and that we should respect people of other

faiths. Fair enough. But the language he used goes beyond respect into what sounds like indifferentism: the idea that one religion is as good as another.

This was not a new problem with Pope Francis. He had made similar comments before, most notably in the 2019 *Document on Human Fraternity* signed with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, which stated that ‘the pluralism and the diversity of religions’ is ‘willed by God in His wisdom.’ That phrase caused such controversy that the Vatican eventually issued a clarification, in itself rather unclear, suggesting it meant God permits religious diversity rather than positively willing it.

But here’s the thing: if the Pope’s statements on religious pluralism require repeated clarifications, and if those clarifications themselves generate debate, the original statements were too ambiguous. When the Vicar of Christ speaks on matters touching the uniqueness of Christ and the necessity of the Church for salvation, we need clarity, not cleverness.

## **The Disorientation of Doctrinal Ambiguity**

Sister Lucia of Fatima, one of the seers who witnessed the Virgin Mary’s apparitions in 1917, spoke in her later years of a *diabolical disorientation affecting the Church*. While we should be cautious about private revelation, the phrase aptly describes what happens when doctrinal ambiguity reigns: people become disoriented, unable to discern true north. This is especially true in the Americas and Western Europe.

**The devil doesn’t need to convince the Church to formally promulgate heresy. He just needs to introduce enough confusion that people can’t tell truth from error, or that they lose confidence in the Church’s ability to teach definitively.** Once that happens, every Catholic becomes his own magisterium, picking and choosing which teachings to accept based on personal preference or contemporary fashion.

This is precisely what we see happening. Some Catholics of a progressive disposition invoke Vatican II, *Amoris Laetitia*, and Pope Francis to justify positions on everything from divorce to homosexuality to religious indifferentism. There are other Catholics which cite pre-Vatican II magisterial teaching and insist that nothing can be changed or has changed. Both groups claim to be faithful to Catholic tradition. **Both groups can point to Church documents that seem to support their position. The result? Division, confusion, and a weakening of the Church's moral witness to the world, and this is precisely the problem: confusion of the faithful.**

**The problem compounds itself: when people see bishops disagreeing about what papal documents mean, or popes seemingly contradicting previous popes, they lose trust in the teaching authority of the Church. And when people lose trust in the Magisterium, they're left to their own devices in discerning truth: which looks a great deal like Protestantism, and exactly what the Catholic Church was supposed to provide a remedy for.**

And we must remember that this isn't an academic exercise. *Doctrinal ambiguity has real consequences for real souls.* Consider the divorced and remarried Catholic who hears from one priest that he can receive Communion after going through a discernment process, but from another priest that he cannot. Whom should he believe? If he follows the permissive interpretation and receives Communion while in a state of mortal sin, he commits sacrilege and damages his soul. If he follows the strict interpretation when the permissive one is actually correct, he's being unnecessarily cut off from the source and summit of Christian life.

Consider the Catholic with same-sex attraction who hears the Pope say that God made him and loves him (which is true) but interprets this (not unreasonably, given *Fiducia Supplicans*) to mean that his same-sex relationship is part of God's plan for him

and can be blessed by the Church. If he proceeds to live in a sexually active same-sex relationship believing it's not sinful, he's being led into grave moral error that puts his salvation at risk.

Consider the Catholic in any pluralistic nation who hears the Pope say that all religions are gifts and paths to God. If he concludes from this that missionary work is arrogant or that his non-Christian friends don't need to hear about Jesus, he's abandoning the Great Commission and potentially leaving people in spiritual darkness.

These aren't hypothetical scenarios. They're happening every day. And they're happening because the Church's shepherds have failed to speak with clarity on matters of eternal significance.

## **The Betrayal of Newman's Understanding of Development**

Defenders of Vatican II and recent papal teaching often invoke Saint John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* to argue that what looks like contradiction is actually legitimate doctrinal development. But this invocation is often a misunderstanding, if not a betrayal, of what Newman actually meant.

Saint John Henry identified several notes of authentic development: preservation of type, continuity of principles, power to assimilate, logical sequence, anticipation of the future, conservative action upon the past, and chronic vigor. Real development preserves the essential character of the doctrine while unfolding its implications. It's organic, like a tree growing from a seedling, recognizably the same thing, just more fully realized.

What **Saint John Henry did not envision was 'development' that appears to contradict prior definitive teaching**, or that requires linguistic gymnastics of interpretation to square with tradition. When John Courtney Murray admits that

*Dignitatis Humanae* represents a development that ‘remains to be explained by the magisterium,’ he’s essentially admitting it doesn’t pass Newman’s tests, or at least, that it’s unclear whether it does.

Real development doesn’t require sixty years of theological debate to determine whether it’s actually consistent with what came before. Real development doesn’t produce opposite interpretations among bishops in good standing. Real development doesn’t make the faithful less certain about what the Church teaches.

The trajectory from Vatican II’s ambiguities of many of the Church’s pastors doesn’t look like the organic unfolding of a single coherent truth. It looks like drift, like a loosening of moorings, like each generation of Church leadership feeling freer to revise or ‘reinterpret’ what their predecessors taught with clarity.

I also have to be very clear about what I criticize here. **This isn’t an argument that Vatican II was invalid or that Pope Francis was not a real Pope. It’s an argument that ambiguous language in Church documents, whether conciliar or papal, is dangerous, and that recent years have demonstrated just how dangerous it can be.**

**The Church has a sacred obligation to teach clearly, especially on matters of faith and morals.** This obligation comes from Christ himself, who promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church into all truth and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. When the Church speaks with ambiguity on crucial matters, she risks failing in her mission because ambiguity facilitates error. **When two bishops can read the same papal document and come to opposite conclusions about whether divorced and remarried Catholics can receive Communion, at least one of them is wrong. And if the document had been clear, that error could have been avoided.**

**The faithful have a right to clear teaching and the Church's pastors have a duty to provide for this. When they receive mixed messages, when they can find Church documents that seem to say different things, they're being failed by their shepherds.**

**At the end of the day the Holy See has to acknowledge that some of Vatican II's formulations were ambiguous and to clarify them in a way that demonstrates their continuity with Tradition, or, if that can't be done, to acknowledge that ambiguous formulations should be set aside in favor of the clear teaching that came before.**

**The Church needs popes and bishops who prioritize doctrinal precision over pastoral sensitivity, not because pastoral sensitivity doesn't matter, but because the most pastoral thing you can do is tell people the truth clearly. Confusion isn't compassionate. Ambiguity isn't merciful. Leaving people uncertain about whether they're in a state of grace or committing mortal sin isn't accompaniment... it's abandonment.**

**The Church needs to recover the understanding that truth is more important than dialogue, that clarity is more important than conviviality, and that the salvation of souls is more important than avoiding offense. This doesn't mean being harsh or uncharitable. It means being honest. It means saying hard things when hard things need to be said. It means not hiding behind pastoral language when doctrinal precision is called for.**

## **Conclusion**

Vatican II was supposed to open the windows and let fresh air into the Church. Instead, it let in confusion, and that confusion has metastasized over sixty years into a crisis of teaching authority and doctrinal coherence.

The pontificate of Pope Francis has brought this crisis into sharp relief. His comments on religious pluralism, his documents on marriage and blessings, his general tendency toward ambiguous formulations that can be interpreted in multiple ways; all of this represents not a clean break with Vatican II but the logical culmination of the ambiguity that council introduced. However this is not to say that Vatican II was evil or that Pope Francis was a heretic. It means that when the Church chooses ambiguity over clarity, whether from a desire to be pastoral or ecumenical or relevant, it sows seeds that grow into weeds of confusion. And those weeds choke the life out of faith.

The Church will survive this crisis, because Christ promised it would. But how many souls will be lost in the confusion? How many people will leave the Church or fall into serious sin because they couldn't get a straight answer about what the Church teaches? How many will stand before God and say, 'I didn't know, because my shepherds did not speak with clarity?'

These are not rhetorical questions. They're urgent ones. And they demand a response from the Church's leadership: clarity, now, on the matters that affect salvation. Not more dialogue. Not more ambiguity. Not more documents that require further documents to explain them. Just truth, spoken plainly, in continuity with everything the Church has always taught.

Anything less is a betrayal of the deposit of faith and a danger to souls. And in the economy of salvation, there's nothing more serious than that.