

I: Urbi, but not Orbi ... the Cardinal, the Church, and the World

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Reading Cardinal Ratzinger, I was carried back some years to a visit I once paid to a well-known Catholic institution in Toronto. A bizarre painting dominated the dining-room. It depicted a turbulent sea of blood, through which waded skeletal horses. On their backs, hate-crazed figures in armour raged impotently against a rock which soared into the clouds. On its summit, bathed in celestial light, was a scale model of the basilica of St. Peter's in Rome. The message of this edifying example of North American post-expressionism was unequivocal, so obvious that it could have been set to music; as indeed, by countless Victorian hymnodists, it was.

Who is she that stands triumphant,
Rock in strength, upon the Rock,
Like some city crowned with turrets
Braving storm and earth-quake shock?

Empires rise and sink like billows
Vanish and are seen no more;
Glorious as the star of morning
She o'erlooks the wild uproar.

Hers the kingdom, hers the sceptre
Fall ye nations at her feet;
Hers the truth whose fruit is freedom
Light her yoke, her burden sweet.¹

Ecclesia contra mundum, light against dark, good against evil, God against the devil. Such polarities were the heart of a version of Catholicism with a pedigree stretching back at least to Augustine's *City of God*, but which had its heyday in the Italian Church-struggle of the Risorgimento. The hierarchical Church's self-perception focussed then on the embattled Prisoner of the Vatican, defending truth by defining its incompatibility with 'progress, liberalism and recent civilisation'.² One of Cardinal Ratzinger's nineteenth-century predecessors in the Sacred College declared:

The Incarnate Word dethroned the world. Its atheism, its idolatries, its corruptions, its cruelties, its immoralities, its philosophies, its superstitions, were all swept away in the light of the Incarnation; but ever since its downfall the world has been striving to dethrone the Incarnate Word. The conflict is going on at this hour; it is now closing in, round about the Church and the Head of the Church, with its last array of power. But it shall not prevail.³

These Tolkienesque oppositions found their scriptural warrant, in so far as any was sought, in the application to the Pope of the Servant songs in Isaiah, in certain utterances of the Johannine Christ, and in what seems now a near-blasphemous historicizing of Paul's eschatological vision of the perfected destiny of the Church as the Bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle. It was maintained at the cost of systematically ignoring the experience of the Pauline communities, and of all Christian communities whatever: that the Church is a place in which sin, error and sheer human cussedness coexist alongside grace and truth, and are not always readily distinguishable from them. For such admissions would have muddied the contrasts. *Outside* was the world, flux, the temporal order, the sphere, in Cardinal Manning's words, of 'the instincts of nature and the will of man, of teachers who may err and therefore can mislead'.⁴ *Within* was truth, stability, and the reflected beauty of Christ the King, 'the beauty of meekness, the beauty of faith, the beauty of inflexibility, the beauty of fearlessness, the beauty of fortitude, and the beauty of fidelity to God and to his truth'.⁵ The institution took on the timeless perfections of the Kingdom it existed to proclaim. So did its officials, who could, and who therefore of course did, demand as their due unquestioning trust, needing none of the values of representativeness or accountability by which all healthy human societies have sought to restrain those who exercise power over others.

This is the lurid and simplistic world of easy dualisms from which Cardinal Ratzinger's oracular voice seems to emanate. For him *history*, the world outside the Church, is the place of the demonic. The view from the Vatican reveals the well-nigh universal domination of the Devil, that 'powerful reality, the prince of this world', whose hand is everywhere visible in history 'with its abyss of ever-fresh atrocities that are not explicable just in terms of mankind' (8). He sees in 'the atheistic culture of the modern Western world' Satan rampant, and many 'signs of the return of dark forces'. These forces have invaded at least the outer courts of the Church itself, in the form of the 'liberal-radical ideology of individualistic rationalistic hedonistic' tertiary educated bourgeoisie. They have brought with them 'an anti-spirit, really an incubus' which, under the mask of the 'spirit of Vatican II', has attempted to poison the wells, to corrupt the values of the Church (4).

There has thus existed since the 1960s a 'scandalous optimism', an 'uncritical openness to the world' which must now, urgently, be abandoned. And so the Cardinal calls us once more to minority values, to renew our capacity for 'non-conformism', and it seems that he would welcome the exploration, in some new *fuga saeculi*, of 'new possibilities of Christian life, and thus of human life, in places of recollection' (9,10).

While one may suspect that the appetite for non-conformism of a Cardinal of the holy Roman Church may be somewhat selective, there is much in this with which one would not wish to quarrel. To English Catholics in particular, emerging from the ghetto status of a somewhat angular minority into what bids soon to be that of a major pillar of established values and state occasions, the call to beware of over-ready acquiescence in the *status quo* is a timely one. Without seeking to offend for its own sake, there are many areas of national life—economic relations, defence and foreign aid policies, sexual and family morality—where an authentically Christian witness would be unlikely to endear us to those who dominate our society. Bourgeois individualism and materialism *do* have an unhappy hold over Catholics, both individually and corporately, and there is certainly much in the culture of post-conciliar Catholicism that owes more to west-coast California than to Jerusalem or Rome.

But when all that has been said, the sheer negation of Cardinal Ratzinger's perception of the 'world' is daunting, and raises disturbing questions. He is surely right in his condemnation of 'scandalous optimism', but there is also such a thing as scandalous pessimism. He denounces a supposed contemporary tendency to neglect the doctrine of creation, the 'nail on which the other truths of revelation hang' (15). Yet the doctrine of creation encompasses God's responsibility not only for stones and stocks, but for men and women in all the complexities of their relations, both personal and social. What then can be the *content* of an insistence on the doctrine of creation which takes so uniformly negative a view of the created order? What doctrine of creation is compatible with the practical manichaeism which appears to underlie so many of the Cardinal's utterances? The 'world' is not inhabited entirely by hedonistic bourgeois materialists, any more than it is by abortionists, pornographers, or concentration camp commandants. The 'world' is the place where ordinary men and women live and must find their salvation. It was for love of the 'world' that God gave his only begotten Son, and into that 'world' that the Son sent his disciples to proclaim the good news. It is the Church's responsibility to announce 'new possibilities of human life' not simply, not primarily, in 'places of recollection', but in the very heart of the *saeculum*. And the Christian presence in the *saeculum* is not, and ought not to be, that of

benevolent aliens, proclaiming a call away and beyond. There is no simple polarity between Christian values and what 'appears good, obvious and logical' in the 'world' (9). Much that is most life-giving and healthy in our culture has little to do, in any overt sense, with the Church, and the Church has often and notoriously lagged behind the intellectual and the ethical lead of those outside it. It is a simple but terrible fact that the Catholic Church did not finally repudiate slavery till the pontificate of Leo XIII, two generations after almost every other major moral agency in Europe. The Spirit of God, mercifully, is not confined to the approved ecclesiastical channels.

Cardinal Ratzinger would no doubt claim that he has acknowledged this, in conceding that 'there are values that, though they appeared outside the Church, yet, suitably purified and corrected, have their place in its world-view'. He admits that the Church needed to 'take on' the 'best values that two centuries of liberal culture had produced', and claims 'that has taken place' (13). This is breath-taking in its superficiality. 'Values' are not detachable entities which can be removed from the structures—intellectual, social, political, economic—which give them shape and coherence. They are not pills which (suitably gilded) can be swallowed painlessly, taking care not to exceed the stated dose. *Really* to 'take on' the 'best values of liberal culture' would involve for the Church deep structural transformations. Most people would agree that among the 'best values of liberal culture' are the belief that government should be accountable, that the governed have a right to a say in their government, and the belief in the right of accused persons to a fair and open trial. It is hard to see how the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith could maintain with a straight face that *these* values have been 'taken on' by the Catholic Church. It is, indeed, difficult to see that they are even compatible with the structures and procedures by which at present dioceses are governed, bishops chosen and appointed, or orthodoxy maintained.

The other element in Cardinal Ratzinger's church/world polarity is the idealized account of the Church which he offers. For all this confusion, cultural crisis, hedonism, the abyss of ever-fresh atrocities, all this belongs outside the Church, the Last Redoubt. His Church is free from the flux and relativism of the world. In its 'fundamentals' and its 'core' it is a 'superhuman reality'. The Cardinal finds this unconditioned core in dogma, and in the 'arbitrariness of its essentially hierarchical order'. For him, therefore, the great value to be recovered is 'the necessity of obedience' (16). So, in talking of the Church we swim away again on the rhetoric of dualism. Theologians gulled by 'sociological or other arguments' tamper with, the 'received faith' instead of defending it, seeking selectively to make it 'humanly interesting according to the cultural tendencies of the moment' (18, 19).

The Cardinal contrasts the received faith, the 'deposit', with the culturally conditioned perspectives imposed on it in Latin America, the United States, Europe, Africa (20, 21). The question suggested by all this, of course, is where might one find the *unadulterated* deposit? Who, where, has ever had access to an eternal gospel *not* subject in some fundamental sense to the particularities of time and place and circumstance? Granting that in Latin America the 'deeply biblical notion of liberation' is in danger of contamination from Marxist influence, and in the First World from 'liberal-radical libertarian culture', are we to conclude that on the Vatican hill there is a purer air, that there will be found a mode of human understanding which *excludes* all cultural, educational, social assumptions and bias? Behind the Cardinal's words on this subject seems to lie the belief that revelation, the 'deposit', consists of formulas and propositions which by some miracle remain exempt from the fate of all other words and propositions, timelessly the same, and understood to be the same. On this view the truth of God is passed, unchanged, from one generation to another, like a baton in a relay race. But the mystery of God was revealed not in formulas, but in a person; it is passed not from hand to hand, but from heart to heart, and in its progress it takes on the living, breathing, particularity of the men and women who proclaim it.

The words of the dead

Are modified in the guts of the living.⁶

This process, the articulation of the ineffable by limited men and women, is evident already in the complexities of scripture. There is no access for any group or individual, however sacred, to some privileged and unconditioned form of truth. There is no exemption in the Church from the flux of the world. *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*; but it is the Cross which stands, not the Church, and the mode of its stability is one in which all human securities whatever are called in question. The language of faith, like the language of secular concern, is subject to the same process of slippage, erosion and absorption by which meaning shifts and moves on. The Church has eternal truth to proclaim, but it must do it in words and concepts and symbols which are themselves cultural artifacts, part of the world which is passing away.⁷ The relation of the Church to truth, as to all the created order, is not *miraculous*, breaking through the limitations of earthly existence, but *sacramental*, speaking to faith precisely in and through those limitations.⁸ And for that reason the theological task of every Christian generation is no mere exercise in inventiveness, yet another variant way of presenting to a changing world unchanging truths. This would reduce the history of theology—and of preaching—to a cosmetic exercise: ninety-seven new ways of cooking powdered egg. The theological task of every age is not simply the proclamation, but the *recognition* of the truth it has received.

And what this amounts to admitting is that there cannot be the sort of simple church/world dualism that Cardinal Ratzinger envisages, for, in the important sense, the Church *is* the world. All its thinking, and even more obviously, all its institutions, draw on and are conditioned by “worldly” models, and are thereby implicated in the relativism and imperfection of the created order. The penetration of the Church by worldly values is not the invention of liberal bourgeois hedonist individualists. The authoritarian and hierarchical model which the Cardinal prefers to the suspect alternative of ‘partnership, friendship and brotherhood’ (14) did not descend, as he seems to suggest, from heaven. The social and cultural and political assumptions which underlie and shape our present notions of papacy and episcopacy derive from Roman imperial government, and continue to reflect it. The Great Powers at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 understood this well, when they restored the dismantled papacy to be a pillar of social and political conservatism in post-revolution Europe. Even the most unequivocally spiritual concerns and activities of the Church are rooted in worldly paradigms.

This can be no news to Cardinal Ratzinger. He is a man who has and uses power. He understands that in its basic mechanics, the Church’s exercise of power differs little, if at all, from anyone else’s. When making decisions on what is true or false, on who is to be encouraged and who frozen off, bishops, cardinals, even popes use much the same criteria as the rest of us. A casual acquaintance with the history of the Church is all that is necessary to persuade even the most sanguine that, in the matter of the use of power, ecclesiastics are, like Mr Gamp’s wooden leg in the matter of walking into wine vaults, ‘quite as weak as flesh, if not weaker’.⁹

When Fr Leonardo Boff went to Rome recently, he was accompanied by Cardinal Arns of Brazil. The Cardinal had with him a letter from the Brazilian hierarchy asking his Holiness to reconsider the question of priestly celibacy. It is reported that the Pope tore the letter up in front of the Cardinal. Such epiphanies of power offer a bracing antidote against the undue and unfair spiritualising of the men and institutions who perpetrate them.

But I am not pointing here simply to the inevitable presence of human infirmity in the Church. I am attempting to indicate a fact about the Church’s structures themselves. There are no spiritual concerns which are not rooted in some ‘worldly’ dimension. Everyone would agree that the present Pope has a deeply religious and lofty understanding of the Petrine ministry and the office of Supreme Pastor. Though that conception clearly owes much to a particular ‘monarchic’ view of the Church, and even to certain sorts of populism made possible only by the mass media, its roots are theological. In articulating that theological vision, the Pope has undertaken

extensive—and therefore expensive—travels abroad. These pastoral visits are fundamental to John Paul II's papacy. They could not have taken place without the underpinning of vast capital sums. *This* sort of ministry involves *that* sort of economic commitment. No Banco Ambrosiano, no pope. So under which of the Cardinal's rubrics should we bracket the Vatican's sometimes colourful financial affairs—'Church' or 'world'?

Behind Cardinal Ratzinger's profound rejection, then of the transformations and flux of contemporary Catholicism is not the rejection of the 'world' by the Church, but the repudiation of one form of 'worldliness' in favour of another. Ascetic, aristocratic, authoritarian, corporatist, over against liberal, democratic, bourgeois, individualistic. We should accept neither his deification nor his demonization of these polarities. They represent an attempt to bypass the messiness of reality and of engagement with the puzzle and pain of being human, by a Church which does and should share that puzzle and pain. As Christians we bring to the human dilemma, not any bogus claim to privileged clarities in the hands of irreproachable spokesmen, but the proclamation of a hope for men and women *as* they are and *where* they are. The Church *has* a treasure; Vatican gilding should not blind us to the fact that she holds it in earthen vessels.

- 1 Aubrey de Vere, *Westminster Hymnal*, no. 135.
- 2 *Syllabus of Errors*, no. 80.
- 3 Henry Edward, Cardinal Manning, *The Glories of the Sacred Heart* (London 1876) p. 187.
- 4 Henry Edward, Cardinal Manning, *Sermons on Ecclesiastical Occasions* (Dublin 1863) p. 274 (from 'Occisi et coronati', a sermon preached at the requiem for those who had been killed defending the temporal power of the papacy.)
- 5 Manning, *Glories of the Sacred Heart* p. 183.
- 6 W.H. Auden, 'In memory of W.B. Yeats'.
- 7 Cf. J.H. Newman, *Fifteen Sermons preached before the University of Oxford* (new ed. London 1887) p. 350:
...not even the Catholic reasonings and conclusions as contained in Confessions and most thoroughly received by us, are worthy of the Divine Verities which they represent, but are the truth only in as full a measure as our minds can admit it; the truth as far as they go, and under the conditions of thought which human feebleness imposes.
- 8 For a general discussion of some of the issues raised here, see Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* vol. IV (London 1974) pp. 221–252, 'The Theology of the Symbol'. For a pioneering discussion of the concept of the Church as 'primordial Sacrament', so central during and since the Council, see Cardinal Jerome Hamer's *The Church is a Communion* (London 1964) esp. pp. 87–90 and the references there cited.
- 9 Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* chapter 40.