

II: Catholic Theology and the Crisis of Classicism

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That the Church is in crisis is, of course, no new suggestion. (Indeed, it is difficult to think of any time, from the Council of Jerusalem to the present day, when the Church has not been deemed, by some of its most conscientious adherents, to be in a bad way.) Cardinal Ratzinger suggests that we now face a multiple crisis of faith, or belief, provoked by the superficial and over-optimistic manner in which, in the 1960s, we confronted the crisis of modern western culture (cf. 4, 11, 22, 25, 34).

In the spring of 1965, shortly before the final session of Vatican II, Bernard Lonergan analysed the critical condition in which the world (and hence the Church) found itself as a result of the breakdown of 'the classical mediation of meaning', and insisted that 'the crisis ... I have been attempting to depict is a crisis not of faith but of culture'.¹

What kind of crisis, then? With what causes, and what prospects for the future? I have been asked to discuss the Cardinal's assessment of the contribution made by Catholic theologians to our present predicament. I shall suggest that some light can be thrown on the strikingly negative character of that assessment by considering some implications of the distinction, repeatedly drawn by Lonergan in his later writings, between 'classical' and 'modern' cultures and world-views.

But, first, a word about the Cardinal's story. It is, indeed, a sad one, a 'bitter assessment'. It is a story of expectations of unity dashed by self-destruction; of 'manifold collapse' where a 'leap forward' had been looked for (cf. 3). With hindsight, he seems to say, disillusionment can be seen to have been inevitable. The great expectations of the 1960s were the expression of an 'uncritical openness' (9), an 'indiscriminate turning to the "world"' (11). And so, after the party, the hangover: in the sixties 'a certain possibly scandalous optimism was justified ... the pressure now is all for a new order' (13).

He offers two more specific reasons why the singing has stopped and the dark clouds gathered. The Church has been corrupted from the outside by the individualistic rationalistic hedonism of the Western middle classes and, from the inside, by the emergence of 'polemical and centrifugal forces' that previously lay latent (cf. 4). And, as the unrelievedly negative description (from 14 to 24) of a fourfold crisis of

belief makes clear, it is the *theologians* who are the principal agents of this internal decay. It is they, therefore, who must be brought to heel if the 'new order' is to be established.

There are no absolute breaks in historical processes, and Ratzinger rightly warns us against exaggerating the contrasts between 'preconciliar' and 'postconciliar' Catholicism (cf. 4) but, by telling us nothing about the condition of the Church *before* Vatican II, he renders the conciliar outburst of 'expectation' quite inexplicable.

In order to tell an alternative tale, therefore, we must go back before the Council, a long way back, to the formation of the modern world.² In Western culture, 'modernity' has been shaped, for good and ill, by a series of fundamental *dualisms*: dissociations of experience and argument, heart and head, spirit and matter, sacred and secular. Catholicism was, ironically, obeying a very modern impulse when, from the late seventeenth century onwards, it sought to disengage itself from the forces shaping the modern world: institutionally, by withdrawal into a citadel whose inner redoubt became the papacy and its administrative offices; intellectually, by forging a climate of 'official' thought, the ideology of the citadel, that was at once rationalist, absolutist, uniform, jealous of its autonomy and suspicious of secularity.

Throughout the nineteenth century, there were modest moves and mounting pressures towards the re-engagement of Catholicism and culture, pressures that culminated in the Modernist controversy, described by Alec Dru as 'the dénouement of a crisis which had been endemic for two centuries'.³ However flawed the thoughts and visions of the 'modernists', their condemnation delayed, for half a century, an increasingly overdue programme of reform. Catholicism remained besieged within a fortress of its own construction, aloof from and fearful of a world in which its vocation was, in fact, to be an 'Easter people'—a sacrament, in dark places, of unconquerable joy.

Against this background, the 'optimism', the sense of expectation, of the conciliar period, is not surprising. To people who had long waited, and worked, and suffered, it must have seemed as if their vision of a reformed Catholicism, no longer confined to a suspect or eccentric minority, could begin to shape the imagination, structure and thought-forms of the Catholic community as a whole.

I agree with the Cardinal that the mood is now rather different. But does it follow, as he supposes, that so much has gone disastrously so wrong? Here, I think the first thing that needs to be said is that although, in many ways, we have as yet hardly *begun* to implement the Council's programme of reform, nevertheless, what has been achieved, these last twenty years, has in some respects already outstripped rather than cruelly contradicted (cf. 2) preconciliar expectations.

An anecdote may serve to illustrate. In the summer of 1962, a few months before Vatican II opened, I had lunch with a theologian who had acquired a reputation for seeking great things from this Council. Amongst our 'optimistic' speculations on what might be hoped for, we considered liturgical reform and (confident that we knew which way the wind was blowing) agreed that, while a measure of vernacularisation was likely, there was almost no hope that it would extend, in the foreseeable future, to the Eucharistic Prayer. For what it's worth, the theologian in question was Hans Küng.

In the beginnings of a transformed sense of the Church's eucharistic identity as sacrament of human hope, in the burgeoning vitality of Catholicism in the Third World, in increasingly widespread engagement with questions of justice and peace, in ecumenical developments, in dawning recognition of the implications of the fact that most members of the Church are poor and more than half of them are women—in so many ways so much seems already to have begun to happen that the unqualified bleakness of the Cardinal's 'balance sheet' (cf. 3) is puzzling and requires some explanation.

That the present situation is very confused; that many daft and most unChristian things are said and done in the name of Christianity; that tension and conflict within the Church are often more evident than tranquillity; that the dominant form of 'dialogue' seems sometimes to be a 'dialogue of the deaf'; that there is a disappearance of landmarks and a confusion of criteria, I do not disagree. Nevertheless, I cannot share the Cardinal's pessimism nor agree with Louis Bouyer when he said (already twenty years ago, be it noted) that 'what we see looks less like the hoped-for regeneration of Catholicism than its accelerated decomposition'.⁴ Why not?

The short answer is: because it is not *Catholicism* that is 'decomposing' or 'collapsing', but that particular citadel which we once erected. We were away for a long time, and as we begin to re-emerge from self-imposed isolation, we discover (and the discovery cannot fail to be most disconcerting) that the 'world' has not waited upon our return. More specifically, the 'worlds' that there now are, in the cultures of Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa, are worlds in which residual 'classicism' is simply anachronistic. Accordingly as Lonergan put it in 1965, 'The breakdown of classical culture and, at last in our day, the manifest comprehensiveness and exclusiveness of modern culture confront Catholic philosophy and Catholic theology with the gravest problems, impose upon them mountainous tasks, invite them to Herculean labors'.⁵ (But at least, I would add, let us meet these problems, perform these tasks, undertake these labours, in something like a spirit of patience and Christian joy.)

What, then, did Lonergan understand by 'classicism', and how did he contrast it with 'modernity'? 'On classicist assumptions', he

wrote, with tongue in cheek, 'there is just one culture. That one culture is not attained by the simple faithful, the people, the natives, the barbarians. None the less, career is always open to talent. One enters upon such a career by diligent study of the ancient Latin and Greek authors. One pursues such a career by learning scholastic philosophy and theology. One aims at high office by becoming proficient in canon law. One succeeds by winning the approbation and favor of the right personages. Within this set-up the unity of faith is a matter of everyone subscribing to the correct formulae'. But, he added, such classicism 'was never more than the shabby shell of Catholicism'.⁶

The defining feature of the classicist mentality is that it conceives itself 'normatively and abstractly'.⁷ When culture is conceived normatively, it is possible to establish, at least in principle, a set of abstract standards against which all particular concrete achievements of meaning and value may be assessed. The worlds of meaning and value have, as it were, an identifiable 'centre' from which discrepancy and distance can readily be measured. Accordingly, to the classicist, dissent is tantamount to unfaithfulness, significant disagreement is suspect of sedition, and genuine pluralism appears to be the mask of anarchy.

When, on the other hand, culture is conceived 'empirically and concretely',⁸ as 'the set of meanings and values that informs a way of life',⁹ then there is no such set of ideal standards against which particular occurrences and achievements, particular patterns of discourse and policy, may immediately be measured. The worlds of meaning and value become 'decentred'. It does not follow that mankind is irrevocably condemned to an insurmountable and anarchic relativism. It does follow, however, that the common quest for obedience to our common Lord, the quest for understanding of our common faith, is set in the context of a variety of largely unsurpassable cultural, racial, class, conceptual and ideological pluralisms (as Karl Rahner was never tired of reminding us).¹⁰

The 'classicist' assumes that unity of faith, hope and charity can only be secured by silencing dissent and eliminating genuine disagreement. The classicist abhors untidiness. On the alternative account that I have sketched, such unity is to be attained and sustained only by the unremitting labour of generating contexts of shared experience, mutual respect, common work and common prayer. The *unity* of the Church is not only God's gift and promise; its achievement and sustenance are also our continual and onerous responsibility: a responsibility which can only fruitfully be exercised in the measure that *no* group, no sex, no culture, no pattern of discourse, no 'class' (be it clerical or social) arrogates to itself a position of defining centrality. This is not to question the necessity for structures

of authority; it is simply a reminder of the urgency of the need to reconsider their form and function.¹¹

I have been suggesting, in the last few paragraphs, that the pessimism of Cardinal Ratzinger's assessment of our predicament is to be explained, in part at least, by the 'classicism' of the perspective from within which he reads the evidence: for the classicist model of Catholicism is 'collapsing', beyond recall. The classicism of the Cardinal's perspective, or interpretative framework, also helps to explain why he should seek to make his erstwhile colleagues, the theologians, particular scapegoats for our plight.

'A theology', said Lonergan, 'mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix'.¹² Or, as Rahner put it, more concretely, 'Theology consists in conscious reflection upon the message of the gospel in a quite specific situation in terms of the history of the human spirit'.¹³ When the 'matrices' or 'situations' are as diverse, confusing and conflictual as they are today, it is not surprising that the 'voices' of theology, especially when newly liberated from the confines of one particular, normative 'grammar', should be occasionally cacophonous. What is called for, in such a situation, is much patience, courageous trust in the integrity of other people, the taking of great pains to ensure that we represent as accurately as possible the views of those with whom we disagree.

These are high standards but, without wishing to romanticize the 'academy', I am bound to say that they are standards which the academic community is accustomed to set itself, even if we too often fail in our attainment. Here, the Cardinal's style does not help. It is a style which relies for effectiveness on dark but unspecific reference to 'tendencies' (cf. 14, 15, 17) and which, by the accumulation of disapproving epithets, gives the disturbing impression that Catholic theology today is characterized by 'arrogance', 'sectarianism', 'snobbishness' and 'blasé indifference' (cf. 1, 25).

The Cardinal's sketch of a fourfold crisis of belief is, unavoidably, impressionistic in character: an evocation of moods and tendencies rather an analysis of arguments. To attempt an alternative, similarly impressionistic sketch would not, I think, be particularly helpful. And it would clearly be impossible, in a short space, to undertake any detailed analysis of his account of current theology. (For example, he seems to be saying, in 14, that the movement of theology in this century has been from an impoverishment of the concept of God to a 'dilution' of the orthodox doctrine of Christ's divinity; that Freud and feminism have combined to threaten the doctrine of God's fatherhood; that there is some incompatibility between democracy—'partnership, friendship and brotherhood'—and the Christian doctrine of God. Even as generalisations of selected 'tendencies', all these claims seem to me not

only contestable but confused.)

What I propose to do instead, therefore, is to comment indirectly on the Cardinal's text by offering some reflections on the question of the relationship between theologians and the magisterium, on the one hand, and, on the other, between the local church and the Church Universal. My warrant for connecting these (at first sight) rather different issues is that model of the Church, and its constitutive tasks and tensions, which Newman provided in what I have long regarded as one of his most neglected major works: the 1877 Preface to *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*.¹⁴

The Church is a place of prayer, enquiry and action; of suffering, reflection and solidarity; of life, language and organisation. Over forty years, and with fascinating modulations of language, Newman, reflecting on the transformations of social existence worked by the grace of him who is our priest, prophet and king, built up an account of Christianity as 'at once a philosophy, a political power and a religious rite'.¹⁵

Each of the three constitutive aspects of the community finds its particular institutional focus or 'centre of action': the aspect of feeling, devotion, suffering or experience in the local community of 'pastor and flock'; the aspect of learning, reflection or enquiry in the schools of theology; the aspect of power, order and organisation in 'the papacy and its curia' (had he been writing after Vatican II he might, we feel, have given rather more 'collegial' expression to this corner of his 'triangle of forces!').

Each aspect, each 'office', has its 'guiding principle' and each its corresponding proclivity to corruption: 'Truth is the guiding principle of theology and theological enquiries; devotion and edification, of worship; and of government, expedience ... In man as he is, reasoning tends to rationalism, devotion to superstition and enthusiasm; and power to ambition and tyranny'.¹⁶

Absolutely central to Newman's account is his refusal to allocate to any one of the three 'offices' a position of privilege or centrality in respect of the others. The health of the Church consists in the permanently precarious *equilibrium* of all three of its constitutive aspects or principles. This equilibrium is lost when any one of the three 'offices' achieves a position of dominance in respect of the others. It is sustained, humanly speaking, by the mutually corrective (and frequently conflictual) interaction of all three offices. (I say 'humanly speaking' because the ultimate ground and guarantee of that equilibrium, which is not under our control, is the abiding presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ.)

Newman would not have disagreed, therefore, with those who see, in the renewed vitality of local churches (in the flourishing of 'basic communities', for example) a 'tendency' towards fission, and

narrowness and sectarianism. But, on his account, this tendency is to be held in check by the operations of 'catholicity': organisation, collegiality, and structures of world-wide governance.

Similarly, Newman knew that, since 'reasoning tends to rationalism', theologians are always liable to produce theoretical solutions to practical problems. But, on his account, theological rationalism is held in check by the theologian's engagement in and sensitivity to the particular circumstances, experience and suffering of the worshipping community to which he belongs.

But notice that each office is subject to *twofold* corrective pressure—by *both* the other two offices. The theologian's work, therefore, requires the corrective influence not only of the context of worship but also of what I called 'the operation of catholicity', expressed (in part) through the practical instruments of the Church's administration.

To complete the outline, it needs to be added that, on Newman's account, the characteristic tendency of church authorities prematurely to 'order' the life of the Church through the exercise of power requires corrective pressure both from the exigencies of worship and life in particular places, and also from the requirements of sound scholarship and good argument.

It should be self-evident (but, unfortunately, does not always seem to be so) that, because theology and episcopacy have distinct and equally indispensable tasks to perform, there is between them 'a relationship of *mutual dependence*'.¹⁷ (I say 'theology' and 'episcopacy', rather than 'theologians' and 'bishops', as a reminder that we are talking about functions, not functionaries: there have often been individuals who simultaneously exercised both offices.) What Newman's sketch especially helps us to see, however, is that it is to be *expected* that this relationship will be one of tension and, frequently, of friction. (Just as, for example, there will be tension between the requirements of the local church, and those of universal governance; between the requirements of worship and those of enquiry.)¹⁸

A Church without tension, then, would be a Church gone dead, a mausoleum from which the Spirit had departed. This is, I think, a point of paramount importance. And it is a point which the 'classicist' mentality has some difficulty in assimilating. Of course, not all tension is creative, not all conflict compatible with charity, not all pain and misunderstanding fruitful or redemptive. There is laid upon all members of the Church, but perhaps especially upon those who, whatever their particular office or ministry, occupy public positions of influence, the responsibility of the 'discernment of spirits'.

Cardinal Ratzinger assures us that 'the best values that two hundred years of "liberal" culture had produced' have now, suitably

purified and corrected, taken their place within the Church's world-view (cf. 13). I wish I shared his confidence. High amongst such values, surely, is the conviction that, when power is opposed to rationality, or when disputes are settled by power at the expense of justice, then both truth and human dignity suffer. And yet, one of the standing scandals of twentieth-century Catholicism has been the 'one-sidedness' of the relationship between theology and governance. The roll-call of those who sought faithfully to serve the Church through scholarship, only to be silenced and removed from office, their views traduced and their integrity as Catholics impugned, is disturbingly distinguished: Blondel, Lagrange, Chenu, Congar, Rahner, Cardinals Daniélou and de Lubac: the list is endless and reads, in retrospect, more like a roll of honour than a gallery of crime.

Cardinal Ratzinger might reply that these people ran into trouble before the Council, and that things are done differently nowadays. While conceding that there have been minor improvements in procedure, honesty impels me to suggest that we are still some way from attaining a measure of 'equilibrium' in this area.¹⁹ I am obliged to be personal. I am the only English member of the central directorate of *Concilium*. We are a mixed bunch, none of us unscarred by the fearfulness and egotism that are the marks of original sin (but then the same is probably true of some of the officials in the Cardinal's Congregation). We have all, in our time, said silly things—some sillier than others! Nevertheless, I am continually impressed, not just by my colleagues' erudition and intelligence, but by their passionate and loyal devotion to the Catholic Church. And, precisely in a context of 'post-classicist' cultural and theological pluralism, so extensive a network of contributors and editorial consultants, serving a journal published in seven languages, and directed by a board drawn from eleven nationalities has, I believe, an indispensable service to render the Church—even if it is a service in permanent need of fraternal correction (correction which is frequently applied in the proper manner by the journal *Communio* with which Cardinal Ratzinger is, of course, closely associated).

And yet, ever since the Council, and still today, almost every theologian singled out by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for disciplinary attention or much publicised disapproval, has been drawn from our ranks.²⁰ There must be more satisfactory, equitable and less demoralising ways of sustaining that 'tension' between the theological and magisterial offices which (if Newman is right) is, *in itself*, a condition of the Church's vitality. It is for such reasons as these that I am discouraged by the unreservedly negative character of the Cardinal's assessment of the current state of Catholic theology.

Newman, in that great preface, did not draw explicit connections between the theological virtues and the refraction, in the life, language and organisation of the Church, of the three offices of Christ. And yet it

is, I think, possible to do so in a manner that is faithful to his spirit. Accordingly, we might suggest that the local community, the place of prayer and personal relationships, is a particular focus or 'sacrament' of the charity that binds us all into one body; and that the 'schola theologorum', the place of enquiry and the quest for understanding, is a particular focus of our common faith in the mystery of God. It would follow, then, that we would expect the Church's government, the papacy and episcopate, especially to exhibit some aspect of our common hope. If Christian hope, joyfully and courageously sustained in all our darkness is, indeed, a defining feature of episcopacy, it would be most unfortunate if the pessimism of the Cardinal's analysis of the state of the Church today were to give the impression that a priest so centrally placed in our governing structure was ceasing to trust the Catholic Church.

- 1 B.J.F. Lonergan, 'Dimensions of Meaning', *Collection*, ed. F.E. Crowe, Darton Longman and Todd, 1967, pp. 265, 266.
- 2 For a somewhat fuller telling of this tale, cf. N.L.A. Lash, 'Modernism, Aggiornamento and the Night Battle', *Bishops and Writers: Aspects of the Evolution of Modern English Catholicism*, ed. A. Hastings, Anthony Clarke, 1977, pp. 51–79.
- 3 A. Dru, 'Modernism and the Present Position of the Church', *Downside Review*, Vol. 72 (1964), p. 110.
- 4 L. Bouyer, *The Decomposition of Catholicism*, tr. C.U. Quinn, Chicago, 1968, p. 3.
- 5 Lonergan, *op. cit.*, p. 266.
- 6 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Darton Longman and Todd, 1972, pp. 326–7.
- 7 Lonergan, 'The Future of Christianity', *A Second Collection*, ed. W.F.J. Ryan and B.J. Tyrrell, Darton Longman and Todd, 1974, p.161.
- 8 *Loc. cit.*
- 9 Lonergan, *Method*, p. xi.
- 10 Cf. e.g., K. Rahner, 'A Small Question Regarding the Contemporary Pluralism in the Intellectual Situation of Catholics and the Church', *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 6, tr. K.—H. and B. Kruger, Darton Longman and Todd, 1969, pp. 21–30; 'Pluralism in Theology and the Unity of the Creed in the Church', *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 11, tr. D. Bourke, Darton Longman and Todd, 1974, pp. 3–23.
- 11 Cf. Nicholas Lash, *Voices of Authority*, Sheed and Ward, 1976, pp. 43–54.
- 12 Lonergan, *Method*, p. xi.
- 13 Rahner, 'Ecumenical Theology in the Future', *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 14, tr. D. Bourke, Darton Longman and Todd, 1976, p. 256.
- 14 J.H. Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*,³ London, 1877, pp.xv—xciv. For the analysis of this preface on which I am drawing in the following paragraphs, cf. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*, Darton Longman and Todd, 1979, pp. 89—108.
- 15 Newman, *Via Media*, p. xl.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. xli.
- 17 K. Rahner, 'Magisterium and Theology', *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 18, tr. E. Quinn, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984, p. 63, his stress.
- 18 Thus Newman speaks, again and again, of the likelihood of 'collisions' between the various offices and their requirements: cf. e.g. *Via Media*, pp. xlili, li, lxxxii, xciii.
- 19 That concession is sadly, too sanguine. The sentence was written before the news of the attempt to silence Leonardo Boff by the naked exercise of power in apparent disregard of the authority of the Brazilian episcopate, of "due process", and of considerations of natural justice.
- 20 Boff is co-director of our Third World Theology section.