

Radical Traditionalists

by Sebastian R. Fama

There are several radical traditionalist groups that reject the Second Vatican Council and the liturgical changes that followed. They refer to those who have accepted the changes as "The Conciliar Church." They somehow imagine that members of this "Conciliar Church" are no longer Catholic.

These groups understand that ecumenical councils have always spoken with authority. They try to get around this by claiming that Vatican II was a "pastoral" and not a "doctrinal" council. A pastoral council, they contend, can teach error, and thus does not require assent. But no such distinction exists. An ecumenical council is an ecumenical council. When Pope John XXIII called the council pastoral, he was referring to its approach. He was not creating a new non-binding class of council. What sense would that even make? Why summon 2600 bishops to Rome if their work would ultimately be meaningless?

Radical traditionalists prefer Councils like Trent, where anathemas were issued against heresies. They see Vatican II's kind words to other religions as being contradictory to the work done at Trent. But that is simply not so. Trent was convened to address attacks on the faith by former Catholics (heretics). Thus, anathemas would be a natural part of their work. Vatican II was, among other things, concerned with bringing the message of Christ to the world. Thus, its pastoral approach. If you want to communicate the Gospel effectively you begin by drawing attention to what is good in others as the apostle Paul did in Acts 17:22-23. You do not foster effective communication with condemnations.

The "pastoral argument" becomes even more untenable when you consider two of the documents produced by the council. For instance: "***Dogmatic Constitution on the Church***" and "***Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation***." Use of the word **Dogmatic** would seem to indicate that these documents were something more than opinions.

In its article on General Councils, the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1908 says the following: "All the arguments which go to prove the infallibility of the Church apply with their fullest force to the infallible authority of general councils in union with the pope." But even if the documents in question were not the product of an ecumenical council, they would still require assent as they were promulgated by Pope Paul VI. Any teaching promulgated by a pope is authoritative by virtue of the Church's Ordinary Magisterium (Vatican I, session 3, chapter 3).

Radical traditionalists try to back up their arguments by quoting council documents out of context. For instance, I received the following concerning "*Lumen Gentium*:"

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among these there are the Moslems, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind (*Lumen Gentium* No. 16).

Ask any Moslem if he adores Jesus as God. He does not and therefore he denies the one true God. Therefore, Vatican II is in error when it equates Islam with Catholicism. Jesus established one Church and it has no equal.

There is no claim here of spiritual equality. Someone can acknowledge the Creator without sharing our belief that Jesus is God. This passage merely affirms the traditional Church teaching that those outside the Church can be saved under certain conditions. The subject is treated in greater detail a few sentences later: "Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation."

Those outside the Church who will be saved, will be saved despite their false beliefs not because of them. There is nothing new here. *Lumen Gentium* also taught:

1. All men are called to the union of the Catholic Church (1:3)
2. The Church has the mission to proclaim the kingdom of Christ to all peoples (1:5)
3. Christ is the one mediator (1:8)
4. The Church is necessary for salvation (2:14)
5. Whoever knows this and leaves the Church cannot be saved (2:14)

Radical traditionalists are scandalized by the liturgical abuses that plague many Catholic churches. They are appalled by Catholic universities that routinely alter Church doctrines to make them more acceptable. On these points their outrage is justified. Indeed, every Catholic should be outraged by such behavior. However, dissent by some never justifies schism by others. As someone once said, "You don't leave Peter because of Judas."

Some radical traditionalists are more creative than others. Within the movement there is a group known as Sedevacantists. This group realizes that Catholics are supposed to be obedient to the pope. And yet they have been at odds with every pope since the council. Their solution to this dilemma – they claim there has not been a pope since 1958. How do they know there has not been a pope since 1958? Because everyone who has occupied the office since that time has disagreed with them. Therefore, they must be heretics and thus not real popes.

There are a couple of things wrong with this argument. First, not agreeing with someone's private interpretation of Church documents does not constitute heresy. Second, even if they were guilty of heresy, they would still have been popes. Pope Pius XII, the last real pope according to Sedevacantists, tells us as much in his apostolic constitution "*Vacantis Apostolicae Sedis*." He wrote: "None of the cardinals may in any way, or by pretext or reason of any excommunication, suspension, or interdict whatsoever, or of any other ecclesiastical impediment, be excluded from the active and **passive election** of the supreme pontiff. We hereby suspend such censures solely for the purpose of the said election; at other times they are to remain in vigor" (no. 34).

Passive election refers to the cardinal himself being elected pope. This may seem odd at first glance. But it is necessary. Heresy can be a purely internal disposition without any outward manifestation. If a pope were a heretic and kept it to himself no one would know. If being a heretic would negate a papal election and you could never know for sure if a pope were a heretic, it follows that you could never know if we had a pope. If this were the case the Church would be in a constant state of chaos. We see this same principal applied to the Eucharist. The validity of the Eucharist does not depend on the worthiness of the priest. If it did you would never know if you were receiving a validly consecrated host. If a heretic became pope, the Church would be protected from his heresy by papal infallibility. We have Christ's word on that (Matthew 16:18).

As we saw earlier, some radical traditionalists believe that only Catholics can be saved. This idea was condemned by Pope Pius IX in his encyclical, "*Quanto Conficiamur Moerore*," No. 7. Some believe that Christ died only for the elect. This idea was condemned by the Council of Trent, session 6, chapter 2. The late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, a leader in the movement, even appointed his own bishops. This was condemned by Pope Pius XII in "*Ad Apostolorum Principis*" and it results in an automatic excommunication for all involved.

Radical Traditionalists need to answer one question; what verse of Scripture or what Church teaching gives them the authority to pass judgment on the Magisterium? If they cannot answer, they lose the argument. If they can, they still lose the argument. And that is because they have proven Martin Luther right and Jesus Christ wrong. And if Jesus is wrong, we are all wasting our time. But He is not wrong. Vatican I spoke clearly on the matter of obedience regarding Church discipline: "Both clergy and faithful ... are bound to submit to this power [papal] by the duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, and this not only in matters concerning faith and morals, but also in those which regard the **discipline and government of the church**" (Session 4, chapter 3).

Radical traditionalists consider 2 Thessalonians 2:15 to be their guiding principle: "Therefore, brothers, stand firm and **hold fast to the traditions that you were taught**, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours." But the question must be asked, exactly what Traditions are they holding fast to? By rejecting Papal authority, they reject the oldest Catholic Tradition (Matthew 16:18-19). Ironically this puts them in a position where they are advocates for the oldest Protestant tradition, a rejection of Church authority. And as Jesus so clearly said in Matthew 18:17: "If he refuses to listen even to the Church, then treat him as you would a gentile or tax collector."