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What was wrong with Vatican II

John Lamont

The Second Vatican Council is still at the heart of the struggles and fortunes of the Roman Catholic Church. Called with the purpose and expectation of bringing about growth and renewal in the church – the 'new Pentecost' expected by Pope John XXIII – it was followed by turmoil and catastrophe. This sequel was admitted by no less an authority than Pope Paul VI, in an often-quoted sermon given on June 29, 1972, in which he remarked that 'from some crack the smoke of Satan has entered the temple of God.'[1] These storms are well-known, and do not need lengthy rehearsal; the departure of thousands of priests and religious after the Council, the effective apostasy of many who remained, the vandalisation of the liturgy, the decline of religious practice among Catholics (amounting to an absolute decline in number in many places), the abandonment of catechesis on the basics of the faith, the general acceptance by Catholics of the moral standards (or lack thereof) of the unChristian society around them, sexual abuse by clergy, and the toleration or active encouragement of all these evils by much of the hierarchy of the Church. The leading role of Satan in all these evils may be admitted. However, Satan does not have the power to cause harm simply through his own efforts; he can only injure the Church if openings to do so are given him by human weakness and sin. Since these evils still beset the Church, we need to ask how the Council may have been connected to them.

Benedict XVI, in his address to the Roman Curia on Dec. 22nd 2005, called attention to two different ways of interpreting the Council; one way was a 'hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture', that understood the Council as breaking with and replacing Catholic tradition, and the other was a 'hermeneutics of reform', that read the Council in harmony with that tradition. It is to the former, illegitimate interpretation that he assigns the blame for the post-conciliar disasters. This analysis is quite correct, but it leaves some questions unanswered. The bishops at the Council were the same people who presided over the mess that followed it. For the most part, they either wholeheartedly accepted the 'hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture', or else went along with measures that followed from it.

[1] *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, X: 1972* (Vatican City: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1972), p. 707.

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They did so for the most part in the sincere belief that they were implementing the Council. This raises a pressing question; what was it about the Council that could have promoted its disastrous misinterpretation, and the calamities that resulted from it?

The mere raising of this question will be objected to by some. How can a Roman Catholic admit that there is anything wrong with an ecumenical council? The answer is that such councils cannot go wrong through teaching anything false. But that does not mean that they cannot be one-sided or ill-judged or even harmful in some respects; and everyone must admit that this has been the case in the past. (Take for instance this excerpt from canon 26 of the Third Lateran Council in 1179; '... We declare that the evidence of Christians is to be accepted against Jews in every case, since Jews employ their own witnesses against Christians, and that those who prefer Jews to Christians in this matter are to lie under anathema, since Jews ought to be subject to Christians and to be supported by them on grounds of humanity alone.'[2]) So the possibility of the Second Vatican Council having been flawed, and of these flaws being connected to its aftermath, must be admitted.

Before considering this possibility, I should make clear that I do not think the Council was simply a disaster. I hold that the Council was on the whole a good thing, and introduced a number of important and necessary reforms.[3] But this only makes more urgent the task of separating the flaws in the Council from its achievements. This task is especially pressing, in my view, because traditionalists have not gone about it the right way. I do not think that the Council can be held responsible for the liturgical abuses that followed it; in this I am supported by the view of Fr. Louis Bouyer, an important figure in the liturgical movement, who remarked of the post-conciliar liturgical changes that 'perhaps in no other area is there a greater distance (and even formal opposition) between what the Council worked out and what we have'.[4] Nor do I think that the Council contradicted previous Church teachings on religious freedom, as the Lefebvrists maintain – the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, on religious freedom, was the most debated and revised document of the entire Council, precisely in order to avoid such a contradiction.

A better criticism of the Council focuses on its constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, and accuses the document of an unrealistically

[2] *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, vol. 1: Nicaea I to Lateran V*, ed. Norman P. Tanner S.J., (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), p. 224.

[3] I have argued for this in an article in the July/August *New Oxford Review*, 'Why the Second Vatican Council Was a Good Thing', that is available online at http://www.newoxfordreview.org/article.jsp?did=0705-lamont.

[4] Louis Bouyer, *The Decomposition of Catholicism*, tr. C. V. Quinn (London: Sands & Co., 1970), p. 99.

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optimistic view of modern culture. This is true as far as it goes, but it does not get to the heart of the problems with the Council. The problems do not lie in the conciliar attitude to particular historical circumstances; they go deeper. They are found in two areas; in the Council's teaching on mission, and in the view of the human condition that underlies its approach to mission. By mission I mean the task of converting unbelievers to Catholicism. (I do not include non-Catholic Christians, observant Jews, or Muslims who accept a version of Islam that respects the natural law, in this category of unbelievers. The Catholic task of mission applies to them as well, but each of these categories raises special issues that cannot be discussed here.)

The trouble with the Council's approach to mission is that although it stresses that Catholics must seek to convert unbelievers, it gives no adequate reason for doing so. It does give Christ's command to evangelize as a reason, but it gives no proper explanation of why that command is given, or of the good that the commandment is supposed to promote. This, of course, means that the command is unlikely to be followed; and it has in fact been largely disregarded since the Council.

This lack of an explanation of the reason for evangelization is a departure from Catholic tradition, which has presented evangelisation as an activity that should be undertaken in order to save the souls of unbelievers. This was explicitly stated as recently as 1919, by Pope Benedict XV, who in his exhortation *Maximum Illud* addressed missionaries as follows; 'your work . . . is a divine task, and one infinitely remote from the meanness of human interests, to light the torch to those sitting in the shadows of death, and to open the gate of heaven to those who rush to their destruction . . . . Who, in fact, stands in greater need of our brotherly assistance than the gentile races which, in ignorance of God, are enslaved to blind and unbridled instincts, and live under the awful servitude of the evil one?'[5] The Council taught that it is possible for unbelievers to be saved (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, para. 16). But it is not this teaching as such that runs contrary to the view that the purpose of mission is the salvation of souls. This teaching is a theological view of long standing, that was widely embraced in response to the discovery of the New World, and that was officially taught by Pope Pius IX (no liberal) in his encyclical *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* in 1863; 'There are, of course, those who are struggling with invincible ignorance about our most holy religion. Sincerely observing the natural law and its precepts inscribed by God on all hearts and ready to obey God, they live honest lives and are able to attain eternal life by the efficacious virtue of

[5] Benedict, XV, *Maximum Illud*, in *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982), ed. Raymond Hickey O.S.A., pp. 36–7, 42.

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divine light and grace.'[6] The task of reconciling these two positions is straightforward. From the fact that it is possible for unbelievers to be saved, we cannot conclude that it is probable that some given unbeliever will be saved, or that we can reasonably believe that an unbeliever will be saved. Knowing that conversion will save unbelievers, and not having reason to think that any unbeliever will be saved, it therefore becomes incumbent upon Christians to try and persuade them to convert. We can draw an analogy with cancer. It is possible to recover from cancer without medical treatment; people did, in the days before effective treatments for cancer were developed. But that does not mean that it is reasonable to believe that any given person will recover from cancer without treatment, or that it is reasonable to not try and persuade people to get treatment for cancer. This balanced position was expressed by Pius IX in 1854, in his address *Singulari quadam*; '. . . they who labour in ignorance of the true religion, if this ignorance is invincible, are not stained by any guilt in this matter in the eyes of God. Now, in truth, who would arrogate so much to himself as to mark the limits of such an ignorance, because of the nature and variety of peoples, regions, innate dispositions, and of so many other things? For, in truth, when released from these corporeal chains 'we shall see God as He is' [1 John 3:2], we shall understand perfectly by how close and beautiful a bond divine mercy and justice are united; but, as long as we are on earth, weighed down by this mortal mass which blunts the soul, let us hold most firmly that, in accordance with Catholic teaching, there is 'one God, one faith, one baptism' [Eph. 4:5]; it is unlawful to proceed further in inquiry (ulterius inquirendo progredi nefas est).'[7]

This balanced position needs to be explicated. It says more than that unbelief as such will not lead to loss of salvation. It is possible to maintain (and theologians in the past did maintain) that unbelief is not a sin when it is beyond the control of unbelievers, but that unbelievers will nevertheless not be saved. Their loss of salvation will then not be due to their unbelief as such, but to the fact that, since they are without faith or baptism, they are still subject to original sin, and thus unable to exercise charity or to avoid mortal sin. Their unbelief, although innocent in itself, prevents them from obtaining the grace that is needed to redeem their sinful natures. *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* rejects this view, and goes further than simply saying that unbelief

[6] Pius IX, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore*, para. 7, in *The Papal Encyclicals 1740-1848*, ed. Claudia Carlen Ihm (Raleigh: McGrath Publishing Co. 1981), p. 370.

[7] H. Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 30th edn., tr. Roy J. Deferrari (Binghamton: Herder, 1955), sect. 1647, p. 416. These passages from Pius IX in fact have a wider range than unbelievers as described here, since they apply to everyone outside the Catholic Church. However, their having this wider range means that they apply to unbelievers in the narrower sense used here as well.

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as such need not be a sin, by asserting that unbelievers can actually be saved despite their unbelief. This is however a modal statement, about there being a possibility that unbelievers will be saved; it does not make a claim about what actually happens. With respect to the actual state of unbelievers, there are different positions that can be taken. One could assign a low probability to unbelievers' being saved. Or, one could simply not think it rational to assent to the proposition that an unbeliever will be saved, while not otherwise taking up a position on the probability of that proposition. Or, one could hold that one should act on the assumption that unbelievers will not be saved. This last view is compatible with holding that in fact there is a high probability of unbelievers' being saved, because the reasonableness of acting on a proposition does not depend on its probability alone, but on its probability weighted by the gain or loss that result if it is true; a point famously made, in a different context but also in connection with salvation, by Pascal's Wager. The idea here would be that, even if it is probable that unbelievers will be saved, nonetheless their unbelief lowers the probability of their salvation; and since what is at stake is an eternity of bliss versus an eternity of misery, any lessening of the probability of salvation must be eliminated if possible. All of these positions entail that, although it is possible that unbelievers can be saved, we should nevertheless endeavour to convert them in order to save their souls. The last position is sufficient to show this beyond a doubt. It shows that if we deny that we ought to convert unbelievers in order to save their souls, we must in consequence accept that unbelief makes no difference to the probability of salvation. This is utterly incredible given what is said in Scripture and tradition about the importance of faith and baptism for salvation (and even given the mere truth of faith, since having true beliefs about salvation and the way to it cannot but make salvation easier to attain, and thus more probable to be achieved). The Scriptural emphasis on the importance of faith for salvation would in fact seem to require a stronger position than the mere view that unbelief lowers one's chance of salvation, and Pius IX gives such a stronger position, in condemning the idea that we can make any sort of favourable judgment at all about unbelievers actually being saved. Such a position is entailed by the Scriptural claims about the necessity of faith for salvation. It does not, it should be noted, say that we must hold that unbelievers are probably going to be damned. This view would be quite consonant with the Scriptures, but does not seem to be required by them, and therefore is not within our capacity to judge. It concerns God's unknown offers of grace – necessarily unknown, since the only visible results of grace given for salvation are faith and conversion – and hence its truth or falsity is beyond our ken. The simple impermissibility of making favourable judgments about the salvation of unbelievers suffices to motivate evangelism, and to make clear to us the role we are to play in the economy of

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salvation; the ultimate fate of unbelievers can be left to God – we are after all not in charge of determining it.

However, the Council did not state this balanced position. It made no reference at all to unbelief rendering salvation doubtful. Instead, in its degree on the missions *Ad Gentes*, it justified missionary activity as follows; '"Christ himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk. 16:16; Jn. 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter as through a door. Hence those cannot be saved whom, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded by God as something necessary, still refuse to enter it, or remain in it (*Lumen Gentium*, 14)." So, although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him (Heb. 11:6), the Church, nevertheless, still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize.'[8] As a rationale for missionary activity this is absurd, since it does not give a reason for trying to convert unbelievers generally, but only a reason for trying to convert those (presumably rare) souls who are already convinced of the truth of the Catholic faith, but obstinately refuse to follow its command to join the Church. It is in fact a rationale for avoiding missionary activity, since if people are not made aware that God founded the Church as something necessary for salvation, they cannot be lost through refusing to be baptized.

This failure to mention the traditional reason for mission, and this refusal to offer a believable alternative to it, could not fail to be noticed by Catholics. It had predictable results. One was to lead Catholics to believe that unbelief was not a serious obstacle to salvation, and thus to lose interest in mission. Thus, a standard text in missiology can state bluntly – and in complete contradiction to the gospel – that 'No longer can we conceive of mission in terms of church expansion or the salvation of souls.'[9] This loss of interest was noted by John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, although that encyclical failed to properly address its cause. Another was to lead Catholics to conclude that the distinctive features of Catholicism and of Christianity were optional. The reason for being of Catholic and Christian faith and practice is salvation. So, if people who do not accept the distinctive features of Catholicism and Christianity can reasonably hope to be saved, these distinctive features are unnecessary and can be taken or left at will. The essential faith of Catholics will then amount to no more than a vague theism with little

[8] Vatican II, Decree *Ad Gentes*, para. 7, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery O.P., new ed. (New York: Costello, 1992), p. 821.

[9] *Constants in Context; A Theology of Mission for Today*, Stephen B. Bevans SVD and Roger P. Schroeder SVD (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 284.

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specific moral content; just what it is for a large proportion of Catholics today. A third result was to make those Catholics who still take salvation and mission seriously feel attracted to religious groups like Pentecostalists, who do stress evangelization and the importance of worrying about the salvation of one's soul and the souls of others. From this stems many defections of Catholics to Pentecostalist and other Protestant sects.

It could be objected that the previous, balanced position was in fact inconsistent. Take the cancer analogy. When one gets cancer, the reason one dies is that there is no causal factor that can control or eliminate the cancer. The reason why one should not expect to live with an untreated cancer is that in the absence of treatment, there is normally no cause sufficient to eliminate the cancer. But with unbelievers and salvation, it is different. We now accept that God offers grace sufficient for salvation to all unbelievers. So to suppose that we cannot reasonably believe that unbelievers will be saved is to suppose that God's offer of salvation to them is ineffectual, or not seriously meant – which is unacceptable.

However, this objection to the traditional position ignores the difference between the causal action of inanimate agents like drugs, and influencing the will of free agents. With inanimate things, to act just *is* to produce some effect with certainty or probability. With free agents, though, there is no necessary connection between offering them something good and their being likely to take it. Most of us have known people who have been offered many real chances to straighten out their lives, but who have not taken them, and are not likely to take them. This lack of connection between having a real opportunity to choose the good, and being likely to take it, stems from the fact that true vice and sin are not impediments to the will, but *directions* of it – they mean that we *want* to do evil. And the more we want to do evil, the less likely we are to accept God's grace; which does not make God's offers of grace any the less real, or our decision to reject it any less free. It is therefore quite reasonable to say that although God makes a real offer of salvation to every human being, such an offer does not make it probable that unbelievers will be saved.

This gets us to the second problem with Vatican II, the problem that underlies its unsatisfactory teachings on mission. The reason we cannot be confident of the salvation of unbelievers is that they are human, and are born into slavery to evil, suffering from the cancer of original sin. Damnation is the default setting for humanity – that is why Christ had to die to redeem us – so we can have no reason for expecting anyone to be saved unless they have undergone a real conversion. (This applies to Christians as well as unbelievers – a Christian whose life is not noticeably different from those of the unbelievers around him has no reason to expect salvation.) To deny

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this is to deny the doctrine of original sin, and to ignore the evidence of human evil that is recorded in all of history. The Council did not of course actually make this denial; but, by remaining silent about salvation as a motive for missionary activity, it gave the impression that original sin and the evil that results from it are not realities. This failure to adequately acknowledge the reality of evil is the second problem with the Council. Although the principal expression of this failure is in the Council's teachings on mission, it is found in other places as well. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, one of the most authoritative documents of the Council, presents itself as unfolding the inner nature and universal mission of the Church. But its description of the Fall passes over that event in a phrase; 'when they had fallen in Adam, [God] did not abandon them.'[10] There is no explanation of what the Fall was, what its effects were, why Christ's death was needed to save us from it, and how Christ's death does that, although these doctrines are essential for understanding the nature and mission of the Church. (*Gaudium et Spes*, the Conciliar document that is the usual target for criticisms of the Council's excessive optimism, is actually more adequate on this issue.) This problem goes deeper than being unrealistically positive about modern society; it is being unrealistically positive about the human condition itself.

This ignoring the reality of evil was the feature of the Council that bishops and curial officials took as a guide when they created the 'Church of Vatican II' after the Council. An example of an official implementation of this approach is the bowdlerization of the Divine Office, the public prayer of the Church. The Office is centred around the psalms, as is traditional, but every passage from the psalms – and a few whole psalms – that condemns evildoers, and threatens their punishment, has been removed. Thus, for example, psalm 62(63), one of the most frequently recited psalms in the Office, stops at the line 'My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me.' The ending of the psalm, however, has been removed – because it runs; 'But those who seek my life to destroy it will go into the depths of the earth. They will be delivered over to the power of the sword; They will be a prey for foxes. But the king will rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him will glory, For the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.' (NASV). This really shocking and blasphemous censorship of the Scriptures illustrates how the 'spirit of Vatican II', of which the refusal to acknowledge evil was a central part, was preferred to God's revelation. Another official measure was the new code of canon law promulgated after the Council. The canonists R. Michael Dunnigan and Charles Wilson have pointed out the greatly reduced role of penal sanctions in the new code, compared to the old, with penalties for

[10] Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, para. 2, in Flannery (1992), p. 350.

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specific crimes being reduced from 101 in the old code to 35 in the new.[11] Bishop V. de Paolis, formerly professor of canon law at the Gregorian University and now secretary of the Apostolic Signature (the supreme court of appeal in the Church), has questioned whether the penal law of the new code is able to sufficiently protect the souls and the rights of the faithful.[12] Further examples of official measures stemming from a refusal to acknowledge evil are the abolition of the post of devil's advocate in canonization cases, and the grave inadequacy of the new rite of exorcism (a rite that has been described by the chief exorcist of Rome, Fr. Gabriele Amorth, as a farce[13]). On the level of a language group rather than the universal church, there are the standard English versions of the liturgy originally produced by ICEL (the International Commission on English Liturgy) in the 1970s, versions which the new secretary of ICEL, Fr. Bruce Harbert, has described as tending towards the Pelagian heresy.[14]

In addition to these official measures, there have been policies that were not officially promulgated but were generally agreed on. Dunnigan and Wilson point out that even the reduced penal sanctions of the new code have been tacitly abandoned, and that penal sanctions are no longer applied. The most scandalous example of this has been sexual abuse by priests. Canon law requires that this offence be punished (cf. canon 1395 §2 of the 1983 code), but this canonical requirement was broken by bishops, who simply refused to apply it. This refusal was a reflection of the post-conciliar practice of appointing 'pastoral' bishops. A 'pastoral' bishop was understood to be one who would not confront rejection of the Church's doctrinal and moral teachings, but instead treat such rejection as an acceptable option for Catholics – and would require everyone over whom he had power to do the same.

When it comes to trends and policies outside the hierarchy, obvious examples of the refusal to acknowledge evil are the wide acceptance of proportionalism and fundamental option theories by moral theologians. Both these positions (which have now been condemned by Rome) are designed to permit or excuse actions that were formerly thought to be mortally sinful, or to remove any real possibility of mortal sin entirely. However, the refusal to acknowledge evil is so influential that it characterizes the thought of many Catholics who see themselves as rejecting 'progressive' notions. One example of this is the enthusiasm for the mitigated form of universalism put forward

[11] See R. Michael Dunnigan and Charles Wilson, 'Overdosing on the Medicine of Mercy', June 2004, at. http://www.st-joseph-foundation.org/newsletter/lead.php?document=2004/22-3.

[12] Quoted in in Dunnigan and Wilson (2004).

[13] In an interview in *30 Days*, June 2001.

[14] In an interview in the *Catholic Herald*, May 2002.

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by Hans Urs von Balthasar, which claims that we can at least hope that no human being is damned. Such universalism denies the reality of impenitent sin. Another example, also linked to von Balthasar, is the popularity of investigating the connection between theology and aesthetics, and approaching the Christian message through a consideration of art and beauty. This is perfectly legitimate in itself, but if it becomes the mainstay of theology sin gets left out. God is beautiful, and sin is ugly, but there is more to its evil than ugliness; ugliness in itself is not sin. Ugliness is unpleasant, but it does not as such attract the wrath of God and bring damnation.

What is the explanation for this refusal to acknowledge evil on the part of the council, and for the adoption of this flaw in the Council as the main aspect of postconciliar changes? Such refusal is of course a comforting illusion that is attractive to human nature, but this attractiveness did not suddenly increase during and after the Council, and so it cannot explain the change in attitude to evil that occurred.

It should be stated that the postconciliar embrace of this refusal was partly due to shortcomings that the Council tried to remedy. Ignorance of the Scriptures was one such shortcoming. Many Catholics must have had the experience of going to Mass and being struck by the almost grotesque disparity between a bloodcurdling reading from the Scriptures and the sappy liturgy in which it was set. If Catholics had been familiar with the Scriptures and taken them seriously as the word of God, they would not have refused to face the reality of evil. The nature and severity of human evil, and God's hatred of it, are very clearly and uncomfortably set forth in the Scriptures.

Another shortcoming was an understanding of morality in terms of obligation.[15] Moral theology was structured around the ten commandments, and oriented to the confessional, with the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit – gifts that are in practice necessary for salvation – being sidelined in theology and catechesis. The council tried to correct this understanding by emphasizing the universal call to holiness, a call that requires everyone to go beyond the simple keeping of the commandments and to develop the exercise of the virtues and the gifts. However, it did not succeed in changing Catholics' conception of morality as a matter of obligations, and this meant that its teachings on the positive features of humanity and the world had a bad effect. If you think of morality as a matter of obeying commands, to say that people are basically good is to say that they will carry out these commands, and hence that they will not do evil. If you think of morality in terms of virtue, however, to say that people are basically good is to say that they have the potential to do what is good, not that

[15] On this see the standard work by Servais Pinckaers O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, tr. Mary Thomas Noble (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995).

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they will actually do it. In order for them to actually do good, they have to develop and act on this potential, and this development involves a long and arduous formation. This latter view is pretty clearly what the Council had in mind in praising the good features of contemporary society; it was saying that this society had potential for good, a potential that Catholics, by arduous striving, could realize. Because Catholics thought of morality in terms of obedience, though, they understood the Council's statements about the positive nature of contemporary society as meaning that what actually happens in contemporary society is basically good, and thus that Catholics should not be at odds with it, but instead go along with it.

However, these explanations for postconciliar trends do nothing to explain the refusal to acknowledge of evil on the part of the council itself. Papal leadership does not sufficiently account for this refusal. John XXIII, it is true, began the council by stating that the Church no longer wished to be condemnatory, but he was in general quite willing to exercise discipline. Critics of Paul VI have claimed that his willingness to tolerate evils in the Church stemmed from his weakness of character, which he then rationalized. There may be some truth in this, but it seems that Paul VI often sincerely believed that not doing anything effective about evil was the right course of action. He was thus more of an instance of the refusal to acknowledge evil than an explanation of it.

Given the circumstances in which the council was held, this refusal was grotesquely incongruous and bizarre. The council was dominated by bishops from Europe, and initiated less than twenty years after Europe had been convulsed by the worst and most brutal war in human history. During its course, a third of the world was groaning under communist tyranny (which the Council refused to condemn), a tyranny that in China was reaching peaks of destruction and insanity during the Cultural Revolution. Africa was beginning to descend into post-colonial hell. Western Europe and North America, it is true, were enjoying unprecedented peace and prosperity; but this peace and prosperity were secured by the American nuclear umbrella, which involved the risk of nuclear holocaust. However, it may well be that it was precisely this situation that influenced the Council towards ignoring evil. Prior to the First World War, Europe was culturally, politically, economically, and scientifically supreme in the world, and saw herself as the acme of human civilization and the standard bearer of progress. The bishops of Europe had seen Europeans go from this pre-eminence to committing the worst crimes in human history, and they did not have the moral, intellectual or spiritual resources to cope with this triumph of evil. So they dealt with it by refusing to admit the power of evil in human life. Dominating the Council as they did the Church, they were able to impose this refusal upon the Council documents.

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There is a specifically Catholic issue as well as a general European one. The Church in the past did not hesitate to condemn evil in clear terms. Here are some fine comminations from Pius IX; 'Never will there be grief enough over the corruption of morals so extensively increasing and promoted by irreligious and obscene writings, theatrical spectacles and meretricious houses established almost everywhere; by other depraved arts and monstrous portents of every error disseminated in all directions; by the abominable impurities of all vices and crimes growing constantly and the deadly virus of unbelief and indifferentism spread far and wide . . . We cannot be silent about another most pernicious error, an evil that is pitifully tearing apart and deeply disturbing minds, hearts, and souls. We are referring to that unbridled and damnable self-love and self-interest that drive many to seek their own advantage and profit with clearly no regard for their neighbor. We mean that thoroughly insatiable passion for power and possessions that overrides all the rules of justice and honesty and never ceases by every means possible to amass and greedily heap up wealth.'[16] And this was uttered in *1863* – the mind boggles at what he would have said about 2006. The trouble with these condemnations is that Catholics felt they had little application to themselves. They were uttered in an European context where the Church was fighting with anticlericalism. The evils denounced were those of the secularist enemy – an enemy who often controlled the government – of whom Catholics were thought to be the virtuous opponents. The righteous self-image that went along with these condemnations was dealt a fatal blow in the twentieth century, when Catholics – and the hierarchy especially – found themselves facing moral dilemmas, and making moral compromises, in the face of Nazi and Fascist rule. M. R. D. Foot, former member of SOE and historian of the resistance against the Germans in the Second World War, remarked that escaped Allied prisoners were told to seek the help of parish priests, because the priests were invariably opposed to the Nazis; but that this was not true of their superiors. De Gaulle, after coming to power in 1945, wanted a large number of French bishops removed because of their collaborationist record – unfortunately, he did not get his way. Amy Welborn has raised this point, asking on her blog *Open Book*; 'Has anyone ever studied the impact of Nazism and the war on Christian theology – not during, but after the fact? Michael [Dubrueil] took a class from Josef Fuchs, and he said that the moral theology of Fuchs, who had been a pastor in Germany during the War, struck him as very accommodationist . . . a "do what you can do" as long as your Fundamental Option is in the right direction (Fuchs being the father of much contemporary Catholic moral theology, as you can tell), and

[16] Pius IX, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore*, in Ihm (1981), para.3 p. 369, and para. 10 p. 371.

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it seemed to him that this approach was very clearly reflective of Fuchs' position as pastor in that situation.' This made it impossible for the hierarchy to continue presenting themselves as the good guys fighting against the bad guys. Of course, it was possible for them to condemn evil as messengers of the Gospel, rather than as a morally superior group. But this would have involved applying the gospel criticisms to themselves as well as to their enemies, an uncomfortable process which they were not in general prepared or willing to undertake. Better to pretend that we are all good guys at heart, and that all that is really needed to improve the world is mutual understanding.

It may be as well that the roots of this failure go back to the Counter-Reformation. The idea that we have to rely on God's righteousness rather than our own is something that sounds Protestant to Catholics, and hence was devalued in the Catholic Church. Of course there are Protestant versions of this idea that are unacceptable, but the basic insight is essential to the Christian life. Without it, we end up having to pretend that we are righteous – a pretence that is the hallmark of the postconciliar Church.

The Council's failure to acknowledge evil was not the main cause of the disasters that followed it, with the exception of the collapse in mission. But it was an indispensable catalyst for these disasters, and lent them most of their strength. Refusal to admit the existence of evil is not just a negative step; it usually leads to actual involvement in it. This is what happened after the Council, as the sexual abuse scandals illustrate. There is a natural tendency for such refusal to be corrected in time, since the increase in evils that it leads to means that evil eventually cannot be ignored any longer. In order for such a correction to have its best effects in the Church, however, it will be necessary to admit the one-sidedness of the Second Vatican Council with respect to evil, and to remedy this one-sidedness through a better understanding of the teachings of Scripture and tradition on the power and gravity of evil in this world, and on the warfare that Christians have to carry out against it.

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