

## Praise for *Christ Brings All Newness*

“Theology today can seem surprisingly rudderless, as if the acquisitions of the last century’s return *ad fontes* had been casually mislaid. It is a tonic to find a theologian whose mind is both disciplined and open, who interprets the signs of the times as such—as significant, not as oracles—in the light of a life-giving tradition. Not easily labelled as ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal,’ he manages to span wide expanses, a balancing act he performs with surefooted elegance still, well past his threescore and ten. This volume by Robert Imbelli, a learned man of the Church, is a treasure.”

—**Bishop Erik Varden**, OCSO, author of *The Shattering of Loneliness: On Christian Remembrance*

“In the realm of literature, it has long been recognized that there are some great masters who excel especially in the short story format. In the field of modern theology, there is no one, in my judgment, who surpasses Robert Imbelli’s mastery of the form of the short theological essay. The essays in this volume are profound, inspired, and perspicacious meditations on the deepest and most central theological themes—above all the perennial newness of Christ. They are filled with the light of Christ and the fervor of the Spirit and will communicate this light and warmth to the attentive reader.”

—**Khaled Anatolios**, John A. O’Brien Professor of Theology,  
University of Notre Dame

“When Hans Urs von Balthasar concluded that the theological guild needs people ‘who devote their lives to the glory of theology, that fierce fire burning in the dark night of adoration and obedience,’ it is unlikely that he had Fr. Robert Imbelli specifically in mind; *Christ Brings All Newness* suggests, however, that he well could have. In winsome, sometimes ecstatic prose, our author joyfully embraces both the seriousness of the theological task and the eternal freshness of Christian life and practice. This book, indelibly marked by a lifetime of contemplative reading, spiritual reflection, preaching, and pastoral ministry, invites its readers not only into the circle of Imbelli’s dear friends—Irenaeus, Augustine, Fra Angelico, Bach, Newman, Ratzinger, Dante, and a plentitude of others—but also and more urgently to friendship with Jesus Christ, who makes all things new.”

—**Jennifer Newsome Martin**, Associate Professor, University of  
Notre Dame

“Robert Imbelli is a theologian who might rightly be described as both ‘Irenaeus’ and ‘irenic.’ Like Christianity’s first great systematic thinker, Irenaeus of Lyons, Imbelli finds the coherence of Christian thought—indeed of all human history and culture—in the person of Jesus Christ, and Christ serves for him at the criterion by which he judges all human achievements. Yet this judgment is always rendered in an irenic spirit that seeks common ground in Christ even as he frankly acknowledges disagreements. This volume gathers essays, reviews, and reflections on a wide range of topics, figures, and forms of theological expression, yet it possesses a remarkable coherence because of Imbelli’s determination to take every thought captive for Christ.”

—**Frederick C. Bauerschmidt**, Professor of Theology, Loyola University Maryland

“Father Robert Imbelli’s pellucid, luminous collection renews our faith in Christ’s promise that he will remain with us always. We come away from this book more vibrantly aware of the way beauty—in Scripture, liturgy, art, and Imbelli’s own theological reflection—can draw us more deeply into friendship with Jesus Christ, who ‘plays in ten thousand places,’ and in whom all things hold together. This work is a splendid companion to *Rekindling the Christic Imagination*.”

—**Paul J. Contino**, Distinguished Professor in Great Books, Pepperdine University

“To everyone who sees this book of Robert Imbelli’s essays and reviews, I urge, ‘take and read!’ Here is strong medicine to heal reductive constrictions of spirit instilled by modern self-referentiality. These writings lead toward doing theology as ‘scrutinizing in the light of faith all the truth stored up in the mystery of Christ’ (*DV* 24). They stir rejuvenating movements of spirit that arise as ramifications of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Imbelli will attract you to exist in the broad frame of New Testament revelation, being thankful to God and generous to many others, moving out ever afresh from your center in the Christ-event as depicted in the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians.”

—**Jared Wicks**, SJ, Emeritus Professor of Theology of the Gregorian University, Rome

CHRIST  
BRINGS ALL  
NEWNESS



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NEWNESS

ESSAYS, REVIEWS, AND REFLECTIONS

ROBERT P. IMBELLI

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
RICHARD G. SMITH

The logo for Word on Fire Academic features the words "WORD on FIRE" in a serif font, with a stylized flame icon above the letter "O" in "WORD". Below this, the word "ACADEMIC" is written in a smaller, all-caps sans-serif font, flanked by two horizontal lines.

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*For Michael, More than Brother—Friend*

“Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens”

“Christ brought all newness in bringing himself”

—Irenaeus of Lyons





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# Preface

## *Sursum Corda!*

As will be abundantly clear from the writings that follow, all my priestly-theological ministry has been shaped and nurtured by the event and the documents of the Second Vatican Council. I was privileged to live and study in Rome during the four sessions of the council. I followed the slow and careful elaboration of the documents and have continued to draw guidance and sustenance from them during my more than fifty-five years of preaching and teaching.

If there is a golden thread that links the essays, reviews, and reflections of this volume, it is the conviction that underlying the diverse writings of the New Testament (and of the Tradition of the Church that unfolds those original witnesses of the faith) is a foundational “logic” or “depth grammar.” I call it the logic of “*novum*/transformation.” In many and diverse ways, it celebrates and proclaims the absolute newness of Jesus Christ and the radical transformation to which Jesus Christ summons believers. Hence the title of this volume, drawn from Saint Irenaeus: *Christ Brings All Newness*.

Vatican II recovered that logic and liberated it from the scholastic encrustations which had dimmed its revelatory luster. Moreover, it presented that salvific Good News in a more experiential and personalist key, rather than in the more abstract and conceptual style of previous councils. It drew inspiration from a renewed and contemplative reading of the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church: it heralded *ressourcement*. But, as I insist, this *ressourcement* is, at its deepest, a re-Sourcement: a return to the unique Source who is Jesus Christ himself.

From my perspective, the many evident failures (at times painfully scandalous) of the postconciliar Church are not due to the council's teaching but to our failure to appropriate wholeheartedly its Christic depth and joyfully to bear witness and proclaim it to others. Too often the council's "universal call to holiness," to radical transformation of heart and mind, has been ignored or betrayed by human self-preoccupation and sin—as has, of course, been the case throughout history.

Apostasy, turning from Christ, assumes myriad practical and theoretical manifestations. Far too frequently Christians act and judge as though Jesus Christ were not present and acting in the world. Thus, the council's endorsement of *aggiornamento* (bringing the Gospel to the contemporary world in intelligible terms) has too easily slipped into an accommodation to the values of a secular age or even, in some quarters, a complete capitulation to the day's fashions. Theology thereby risks being reduced to sociology, and the salt of the Gospel loses its savor. Then discernment in the Spirit of Christ degenerates into the distribution of surveys and the taking of opinion polls.

It will be apparent that, among the theological authors to whom I am especially beholden, John Henry Newman, Joseph Ratzinger, and Robert Barron stand out. Newman, because he so clearly anticipated the council in many of its main themes and concerns. Ratzinger, because as theologian and pope, he faithfully interpreted its teaching. Barron, because he is creatively communicating its evangelical imperative in a postmodern (yet often still searching) American cultural context. In their writings the logic of *novum*/transformation is conspicuously present and determinative.

A further conviction that characterizes all three is that there can be no separation between confession of Christ and transformation of life, between Christian thinking and Christian living, between theology and spirituality. Intimately connected with this

is another important sensibility that unites them. It is their persuasion of the crucial importance of the aesthetic in making real, in embodying and appropriating, the truths of the faith. Each of them draws on images and art, not merely to illustrate but to incarnate the life-giving truths they expound.

So renewing the Catholic vision and imagination must be the task of many minds and hearts, poets and artists very much in the forefront. In this regard, I have often told students that among the great doctors of the Church must be counted Dante Alighieri and Johann Sebastian Bach. To ponder the *Divine Comedy* or plunge into the Mass in B Minor is to be moved to one's depth, where affection and thought take root in the heart, where beauty and truth embrace.

Others will surely identify artistic works that decisively shape and guide their own faith journey. Many may join me in according especial esteem to the great mosaic of the cross as the Tree of Life in Rome's Basilica of San Clemente, which graces the cover of this volume. The vision of the cross as the recapitulation in Christ of all humanity and all creation (Eph. 1:10) continues to rekindle the Catholic imagination of multitudes after almost a thousand years. For Christ, being lifted up from the earth, indeed draws all to himself (John 12:32).

My particular offering in this book is to present three dimensions of the mystery of Christ that can illuminate our ongoing quest. They are the Ascension, the Eucharist, and the Transfiguration. For each there is an artistic representation in the book (the *via pulchritudinis* strongly encouraged by John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis), accompanied by a quote from the New Testament that provides a point of entry into meditation upon the mystery. In the essays and reflections that follow, I seek to explicate and expand upon the choice of these three facets of the Christic mystery. Suffice it to suggest here that there is dynamic interrelation and mutual penetration among them. The risen-ascending Christ

is working the transfiguration of believers by incorporating them into his Body in preeminent fashion through the Eucharist, the sacrament of sacraments. Years ago, Henri de Lubac reminded us that the mystery of Christ's embodiment comprises three inseparable dimensions: the risen-ascended body of the Lord, his Eucharistic Body, and his ecclesial Body. The Word of God continues to take flesh and to dwell in us and in our world.

I have long insisted that the richest theological event which we experience is the celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord's Day. It is the matrix of all our Christian living and Christian thinking. At the beginning of the most solemn part of that celebration, the priest admonishes the congregation: "*Sursum corda!*"—"Lift up your hearts!" Lift them up to the Lord who is both present and ever coming. And, lifting them up, let us widen them further by giving thanks to the Lord our God. Thanks, because all we have is gift. The gift of our very being. The gift of our redemption in Christ. The gift of everlasting life that is the communion of holy ones rejoicing in the vivifying presence of the Triune God—indeed, truly partaking in God's glory.

Meanwhile, still *in via*, my gratitude abounds for all who have accompanied me on the journey of faith. Teachers from grammar school through doctoral studies. Colleagues and students at St. Joseph's Seminary (Dunwoodie), Maryknoll School of Theology, and Boston College. Friends too numerous to name, but very present in thoughts and prayers.

At risk of omitting others let me single out a few whose friendship has been at once challenge and support: Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Bishop James Massa; Monsignors Thomas Guarino, Michael Heintz, and Thomas Derivan; Fathers Khaled Anatolios, Anthony Andreassi, Samuel Bellafiore, John Cush, Giuseppe Fazio, Mauro Gagliardi, Joseph Komonchak, Joseph McLafferty, Louis Masi, Aaron Pidel, SJ, Vincent Strand, SJ, Thomas Joseph White, OP, and Jared Wicks, SJ; and Professors Angela Franks,

Andrew Meszaros, Christopher Ruddy, Andrew Salzman, and George Weigel.

Professor Matthew Levering and Father Richard Smith were instrumental in the volume's genesis. Jason Paone, David Augustine, and Andrew Tolkmith of Word on Fire Academic have my thanks for their professional and patient assistance.

Years ago, I came upon this musing by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry which still resonates deeply with me: "*L'homme n'est qu'un noeud de relations. Les relations comptent seules pour l'homme*"—"Man is but a web of relations; relations alone count for man."

Those already mentioned certainly bear witness to—indeed, give substance to—that realization. Even more so did my parents, Julia and Frank, the human *fons et origo* of my life's journey—not merely biologically, but spiritually. As do those who continue to nourish that journey in ways beyond telling: my sister-in-law, Lillian; my niece, Julia; and my nephews, Charles and Nicholas. And, of course, my brother, Michael, to whom this book is dedicated.

Lifting up my heart to the Lord, I bear them up with me, and with them continuously give thanks to the Lord our God.

Robert P. Imbelli

Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, 2023





# Introduction

## The Heart of the Matter

RICHARD G. SMITH

*The true preaching of the Gospel is to preach Christ.*

—St. John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification*

*. . . what love sees is true;*

*That the world's fullness is not made but found.*

—Richard Wilbur, *A Wedding Toast*

### I

The following essays, reviews, and reflections had various beginnings—several were prepared for scholarly journals, collections, or conferences, others for more popular magazines, still others for internet sites intended for a wide general audience, and one for a Sunday Mass congregation. What makes the varied parts a whole is a thorough and vibrant *Christocentrism*. Such a Christocentrism, most systematically articulated in his *Rekindling the Christic Imagination*,<sup>1</sup> is the distinctive characteristic of Fr. Imbelli's theological project. The diminishment and near-total loss of the "Christic center" in widespread currents of Christian theology, spirituality, and life represents a genuine crisis and a profound impoverishment threatening to distort and even destroy the very heart of Christian faith. Fr. Imbelli retrieves and highlights the Christocentrism that has marked and enlivened Christian

1. Robert P. Imbelli, *Rekindling the Christic Imagination: Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014).

thought and life, beginning with St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church, as a way forward. St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the early second century to the Church in Tralles on his way to be martyred in Rome, provides a powerful witness to the vibrant Christocentrism of the early Church:

Be deaf, therefore, whenever anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David, who was the son of Mary; who *really* was born, who both ate and drank; who *really* was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who *really* was crucified and died while those in heaven and on earth looked on; who, moreover, *really* was raised from the dead when his Father raised him up. In the same way his Father will likewise also raise up in Christ Jesus us who believe in him. *Apart from him we have no true life.*<sup>2</sup>

Christians are to tolerate nothing “apart from Jesus Christ”: that is to say, in the context of Ignatius’s world, nothing from those who would diminish or call into question the centrality of Christ, or those who disdain matter as evil and then retreat into a world of ideas, rejecting especially the Incarnation. Jesus Christ, as Ignatius describes him, is not an abstract idea or theory or proposition to be discussed and debated, or a universal symbol of human potential or wisdom, or a dead man of passing historical interest. He is a living person, a *real* person who, Ignatius emphatically insists, *really* (*alēthōs*) was born, ate, drank, suffered, died, and was raised from the dead. Most importantly, it is *only* in relation to this living person that we can have true/real (*alēthinon*) life. His life *is* our life (Augustine cries out in his *Confessions*, “O Life of my life!”). If, without Jesus Christ, there is no true life at all, then *everything* depends upon coming into relationship with him.

2. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians* 9, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 221 (emphasis added).

As Fr. Imbelli puts it below, “Intimate friendship with Jesus is the very heart of the matter” (page 237).

## II

Pope Benedict XVI’s conviction that intimate friendship with Christ is indeed the “heart of the matter,” and his discernment that the possibility of such a friendship was being undermined by certain strains of biblical exegesis, provided the impetus for his three-volume *Jesus of Nazareth* series. Fr. Imbelli cites Pope Benedict on precisely this point in several of the present essays. The pope writes,

[We are given] the impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him. This impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching into thin air.<sup>3</sup>

Like Ignatius, Pope Benedict presents in his *Jesus of Nazareth* volumes a living person, a *real* person, rather than an abstract idea or memory of a person. A Christian comes to Scripture not with the intent of gaining more information or satisfying curiosity but in order to meet a person, to meet Christ. This means that Scripture is not only about past events but about present realities in the life of the baptized Christian disciple. Speaking to a group of American seminarians in 1984, then-Cardinal Ratzinger described the power of a particular Gospel passage: “It speaks so directly to us

3. Pope Benedict XVI, foreword to *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xii.

because these are not words we must laboriously drag back as it were from the far distance into our life. What is there affects us directly: it is our life.”<sup>4</sup> What he says of one particular Gospel passage is true for all of Scripture: all of it *affects* us because all of it directly concerns our Life.

Scripture *affects* us; that is, Scripture touches the affections, it touches the *heart* and not only the intellect, inviting us and leading us not merely to know *about* Jesus but to know *Jesus* and so then to love Jesus and to believe in Jesus. Fr. Imbelli frequently quotes the First Letter of Peter 1:8: “Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy” (RSV). In his letter, Peter is addressing a new generation of Christians, different from the first generation we meet in the Gospels. Like us, this new generation had not known Jesus during his earthly life. They only came to know him later, through the preaching and the ministry of Jesus’s disciples. But that did nothing to diminish the intensity of their experience of Jesus. Peter says to them: without having seen him you *love* him and, even now, you don’t see him yet you *believe* in him! The verb order is important: love *then* believe, love *leading to* belief; as Saint John Henry Newman writes, “I believe because I love!” Peter’s words signify the success of the early Christians in proclaiming the Gospel, for, as Newman reminds us, “The true preaching of the Gospel is to preach Christ.” They presented a person to be embraced and befriended rather than a proposition to be accepted or denied. They showed the real possibility for an intimate friendship with Jesus even for those who “do not now see him” and that this friendship would be an experience of authentic and profound joy—and, far more, that this friendship would be true life for them. At the same time, Peter’s words lay out the *challenge* for every new generation of Christians: How

4. Joseph Ratzinger, *Ministers of Your Joy*, trans. Robert Nowell (London: St. Paul’s, 1989), 82.

do we “preach Christ” in such a way that he is credible and attractive, so that his invitation to intimate friendship is not merely notional but real?

The distinction (not dichotomy) between notional and real, so central in the thought of John Henry Newman, is pivotal in Fr. Imbelli’s writings. In terms of a friendship with Jesus, the distinction between notional and real is the difference between that which is conceptual, propositional, and abstract and that which is “concrete, vivid, enkindling affection and inspiring imitation” (page 244). This distinction in no way disparages the notional—indeed, there is a proper and important place for the notional in Christian faith. But a real apprehension of Christ is *essential* for Christian faith, life, and discipleship since it is the real, Newman suggests, that moves us to action and to make a response. Christ is preached in a real way precisely when affection for him is enkindled and imitation of him inspired.

Once again, the example of Peter is instructive. The new generation of Christians whom Peter addressed in his first letter came to know and then love and then believe in Jesus Christ primarily through the witness and *personal influence* of those who had known Jesus during his earthly life and who were eyewitnesses to his Resurrection and Ascension, including Peter himself. The next generation, in their turn, preached Christ by *their* witness to what they had seen and heard and by their personal influence, and so on, and so on. This witness and personal influence also eventually came to be extended and exerted through Christian art, music, literature, theology, spiritual writings, and sermons. Christians early on discovered the power of art to awaken the human heart, mind, and imagination to God in such a way as to enkindle affection and inspire imitation.

Most importantly, Christians came to appreciate the Church’s liturgy as *the* privileged place where Christ is “preached” in a real way, so as to establish and nourish intimate friendship. In the

liturgy, the living Christ is present in a way that can be seen and heard and touched and even tasted, present in a way that is both “concrete” and “vivid,” inspiring a real apprehension of Jesus. Liturgy is a profoundly *incarnational* (embodied) experience, and so a remedy for the Gnostic divorce of body and spirit that has never entirely gone away, even from the time of Ignatius of Antioch. Fr. Imbelli uses Charles Taylor’s evocative term “excarntional” to describe the contemporary manifestation of Gnosticism in Western thought and culture: “Many men and women today are suspicious of history and tradition, hesitant to form binding relations, prone to use others as objects to satisfy fleeting emotions as they practice death avoidance and denial. These are manifest symptoms of excarnation—a profound unease with and alienation from our bodily reality” (page 135).

Pope Benedict described a deeply personal moment of real apprehension of Jesus Christ as an intimate friend that occurred for him within the context of the Church’s liturgy. Preaching at the ordination of several bishops in the Vatican Basilica in 2011, on the anniversary of his own priestly ordination, Pope Benedict said,

Sixty years on from the day of my priestly ordination, I hear once again deep within me these words of Jesus that were addressed to us new priests at the end of the ordination ceremony by the Archbishop, Cardinal Faulhaber, in his slightly frail yet firm voice. According to the liturgical practice of that time, these words conferred on the newly-ordained priests the authority to forgive sins. “No longer servants, but friends”: at that moment I knew deep down that these words were no mere formality, nor were they simply a quotation from Scripture. I knew that, at that moment, the Lord himself was speaking to me in a very *personal* way.<sup>5</sup>

5. Benedict XVI, “Homily for the Imposition of the Sacred Pallium on Metropolitan Archbishops,” June 29, 2011, [vatican.va](http://vatican.va) (emphasis added).

That such a *personal* experience of Christ's invitation to friendship would come as an unexpected gift in the context of the Church's liturgy is telling: in personalist terms, the intimate friendship with Jesus to which we are invited is an I-Thou relationship (page 68). In both private and corporate prayer, Christians address God as "Thou"—and it is especially in the liturgy where this "Thou" becomes most concrete and vivid, *incarnational*, precisely because the liturgy touches mind and heart, senses and affections. In the liturgy, Christians address and meet and respond to a real, and not merely notional, "Thou." The liturgy of his priestly ordination enabled Joseph Ratzinger to hear the words of Scripture not as "mere formality" or "simply a quotation" or something laboriously dragged back "from the far distance," but as a living voice, a Thou calling him "friend."

## III

The "intimate friendship with Jesus" that Christians are invited to embrace is a friendship that *recreates*. This particular I-Thou relationship is the one toward which all other I-thou relationships point and find their fullness. The "Thou" here is the incarnate God—the *Christic Novum*—and so, in this intimate friendship, we are brought into the very mystery of God in a profoundly personal and transforming way. Fr. Imbelli emphatically and frequently reminds his readers of Saint Irenaeus's words in the *Adversus Haereses: Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens*—Christ brought all newness in bringing himself. At the heart of Christian faith, life, and discipleship is not a moralism, or a mere imitation of Christ, but *participation* in Christ. And this participation in Christ does not make us merely *better* people but *new* people. Christ brings all newness in bringing himself: in Christ, we experience a new creation, the birth of a new self, a new communion (the I-Thou is also a We-Thou in the communion of

the Church). The Christian truly participates in the *Novum* of the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. The fourteenth-century Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas puts it succinctly: “Union with Christ, then, belongs to those who have undergone all that the Saviour has undergone, and have experienced and become all that he has.”<sup>6</sup> The Christian realizes, in Newman’s strong sense of the word, the mystery of Christ’s Life, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension in his or her person, so that his life really *is* our life, a new life that is “inexhaustible and unending” (page 295)—truly, *apart from him we have no true life!* When the Christian can fully *realize* this new life and say with Paul, “For to me, life is Christ” (Phil 1:21), then the newness Christ brings permeates everything, and one can *really* speak of a “new creation” in which he or she lives.

The participation of a Christian in Christ Jesus is frequently called *theosis* or *deification*. Fr. Imbelli uses the word *Christification* to make explicit and draw attention to the Christic center of this transformation/transfiguration of divine filiation in which “we stand where Jesus stands” in relation to the Father.<sup>7</sup> This participation begins at Baptism, but what follows is a “costly transfiguration” as “the seed planted there must be nourished so that the plant may grow sturdy. And then it must be further pruned and strengthened to withstand the ‘wickedness and snares’ of the world, flesh, and devil. . . . Growth in friendship with Christ entails an ever more generous embrace of his Cross” (page 238). Indeed,

the whole of the Christian life . . . is the appropriation of what has already transpired in our Baptism, but now must be

6. Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. Carmino J. deCatanzaro (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1974), 65.

7. Rowan Williams, *Being Christian* (London: SPCK, 2014), 62. The term *Christification* is central to the theology and spirituality of Cabasilas, cited above. For an insightful introduction to Cabasilas and the implications of *Christification*, see Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1987), 109–39.



realized fully in each of us until together “we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to the one perfected humanity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). . . . Unlike the egotistic withdrawal of the old Adam, anyone incorporated into the New Adam, Jesus Christ, is fundamentally a self who lives the new life of communion. (page 234)

This “new life of communion,” communion both vertically and horizontally, is Eucharistic. Since “*Jesus Christ’s very being is to be Eucharist* . . . the Eucharist is the privileged locus where friendship with Jesus is nourished and cultivated. To the extent that we become present to his Real Presence, our very self becomes Eucharistic: a living out of gratitude to the Father and generosity towards our brothers and sisters” (page 82). To borrow Pope Benedict XVI’s phrase, the life of the Christian incorporated into Christ, transformed/transfigured into a new self in the new creation, takes a Eucharistic form and the Christian becomes a Eucharistic mystic. Fr. Imbelli proposes that “the Christian of the future will be a Eucharistic mystic—one who has experienced Someone, the living Lord—or will not be” (page 81).

## IV

It is true that a thorough and vibrant *Christocentrism* makes a whole of the various texts that follow. But they are also of a piece in the intent that they be mystagogic: that these essays, reviews, and reflections lead the reader deeper into the mystery of Christ in a personal and real way. To that end, the aesthetic dimension of Christian faith consistently plays a central role in Fr. Imbelli’s theological project to renew the Catholic imagination. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that Fr. Imbelli seeks to address what Charles Taylor calls the *social imaginary*. By this, “Taylor does not intend, in the

first instance, theories or even ideas. He focuses first on the images and stories that enkindle our imaginations and shape our sensibilities, the common understandings and practices that make beliefs plausible.”<sup>8</sup> If “for some today God is not so much incredible as unreal” (page 189), then it is exactly the social imaginary that needs to be addressed. Newman once suggested that the crisis of faith in his own time was a matter of the imagination, not the intellect, and that the “passage from the merely notional to the real is mediated by the imagination, by evocative images which captivate the heart” (page 168).

Beauty has a unique role to play in the engagement of the imagination and the expansion of the social imaginary. An encounter with beauty awakens a desire to make a response. In one of his finest poems, Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke imagines standing before a damaged but profoundly beautiful marble statue of a Roman god or hero and seems to hear the statue call out to him, “Du mußt dein Leben ändern!” (“You must change your life!”) And more, true beauty always points toward the One “to whom and in whom,” in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “all beauty comes home.” In the mystagogic reflections of this collection, art and music, literature and poetry, Scripture, the Fathers of the Church and liturgy appear again and again to engage the imagination and awaken love. In the most poetic of the reflections in this collection, Fr. Imbelli describes, in the pattern of the First Letter of Saint Peter, love as a way of seeing and then coming to belief (pp. 166–67). The American poet Richard Wilbur puts it memorably when he writes in his *A Wedding Toast*, “What love sees is true; / That the world’s fullness is not made but found.” It is only love that truly knows Christ, who loves us first. He himself is the fullness of all that is—a fullness that does not have to be laboriously created or dragged from obscurity into our lives, but that is already *given*, already present, in need only

8. Imbelli, *Rekindling*, xxi; for a fuller explanation of “social imaginary,” see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 171–76.

of a preparation of the heart and eyes of love. As Fr. Imbelli tells us, Christ's "presence [is] so real as to be palpable; yet so discreet as to demand discernment" (page 160).

A final word about the word intentionally used to mark the different sections of this collection: *soundings*. Fr. Imbelli's scholarship is consistently pastoral in the best sense of the word. His is a scholarship marked by decades not only in the classroom but at the baptismal font, the confessional, the pulpit, and, most especially, the altar—so that he can say, "I know him in whom I have believed" (2 Tim. 1:12). These collected writings are a personal witness to Jesus Christ, the fruit of a long intimate friendship, offered to make Jesus known and loved and believed—and an invitation to the reader to consider his or her personal witness to Christ and the fruits of an intimate friendship with him. In the classroom, Fr. Imbelli unfailingly showed a genuine interest in what his students thought—in fact, many students can attest to this interest as a hallmark of his teaching method. In many of his classes, students were required to submit brief weekly reflections on the assigned texts in which they articulated an insight into the material and a connection between that insight and some other area of personal interest. The use of the word *soundings* is humble, but honest. The mystery of Christ, like all mystery, is inexhaustible. The best we can do is take soundings of that mystery. There is always more to be said, more to be contemplated, more to be loved. In the following reflections, we might perceive an invitation to make our own insights and connections, to take further soundings deeper and deeper into the mystery, the Christic *Novum*, the Friend who each of us can say in an intensely personal way, "loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).



Christ of Vézelay

“Ascending above the heavens, he fills all things.”

Ephesians 4:10

# PART I

## Essays

Soundings in  
Vatican II's Call to  
*Ressourcement* and  
*Aggiornamento*

# 1. Remembering and Misremembering Vatican II

The Paschal Rekindling of the Catholic Imaginary

## I. REMEMBERING VATICAN II

On a sunny October 11, 1962, I stood, with countless others, in the vast Saint Peter's Square, observing the last untroubled procession of the Counter-Reformation Church, as mitred prelates wended their way into the basilica for the solemn inauguration of the Second Vatican Council. I was a seminarian, recently arrived in Rome, about to begin four years of theological study at the Gregorian University. Even on the periphery of the conciliar proceedings, one was perforce caught up in the event of the council, following the daily reports avidly and attending numerous evening lectures by luminaries such as Congar, Rahner, and Chenu.

Another memorable date: November 20, 1962. On that day, the document "On the Sources of Revelation," prepared by the theological commission (led by Cardinal Ottaviani), was voted on by the council fathers. There had been considerable discussion of the document in the days preceding the vote, and it had received much criticism for its style—overly Scholastic and abstract, insufficiently biblical, historical, and ecumenical—a product of the reigning neo-Scholasticism of the time.

Summoned to vote, more than 60 percent of the bishops chose not to accept the draft. But, according to the rules of the

\* This essay was originally published as "Remembering and Misremembering Vatican II," *Church Life Journal*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.churchlifejournal.nd.edu>.

council, it required a two-thirds negative vote to remand the document to committee.

Then, Pope John XXIII, exercising blessed common sense, intervened. He ordered that the document be recomposed and created a new commission for the task, joining Ottaviani's doctrinal commission with the Secretariat for Christian Unity headed by Cardinal Bea.

The impression created among those of us in Rome was electrifying. We sensed that we were witnessing a radical new beginning, a veritable revolution.

What emerged from the new joint commission was the epoch-making Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Its biblical, personalist, and pastoral style helped set the tone for all the documents of the council.<sup>1</sup>

In interpreting the council, in establishing an appropriate "hermeneutic," the four constitutions play a decisive role. They are, of course, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, and *Gaudium et Spes*. However, in many ways it is the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, which holds a primacy among them.<sup>2</sup>

For if God does not truly reveal himself, there is no foundation for the Church. It becomes only a human association and organization. And if God has not given himself definitively in Christ, there is no basis for liturgy. It becomes a merely human gathering, bereft of transcendent reference.

Distinctive to *Dei Verbum's* presentation of revelation is that it is *explicitly Christocentric*. Though it celebrates God's revelation in the course of the history of the people of Israel, it confesses that

1. For a careful discussion of many aspects of the ecclesial and theological drama of Vatican II, see Jared Wicks, SJ, *Investigating Vatican II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018).

2. Wicks concurs with this privileging of *Dei Verbum*. See Wicks, *Investigating Vatican II*, 223–24.

God's revelation attains its fullness in *the person of Jesus Christ*.<sup>3</sup> It is this Christ-centered understanding of God's revelation and promise that permeates the documents of Vatican II—prominent not only in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Lumen Gentium* but also in *Gaudium et Spes*. It is this Christological “depth grammar” which belies any facile separation of “doctrinal” and “pastoral.” Nor can the council be read as promoting a “pastoral paradigm” in opposition to a “doctrinal paradigm.”

The distinguished Church historian John O'Malley has written of three categories that help elucidate “the dynamics of the Council.” The three are *aggiornamento*, development, and *ressourcement*. And he contends, “Of the three categories, *ressourcement* was the most traditional yet potentially the most radical.”<sup>4</sup> For it is on the basis of principles retrieved from the Church's memory that the present is normed and evaluated. Hence, “*Aggiornamento* was a consequence, not the starting point.”<sup>5</sup> The present situation, the “signs of the times,” are always discerned “in the light of the Gospel.”<sup>6</sup>

“*Ressourcement*” is a term associated with those theologians who contributed to the movement known to their detractors as “*la Nouvelle Théologie*.” They were certainly interested in retrieving the texts of the great tradition, especially those of the Fathers of the Church: *Les Sources Chrétiennes*. But their animating concern sought, through the texts, to apprehend anew the true source of the Church's faith: Jesus Christ himself. Already in 1938 Henri de Lubac wrote in *Catholicism*, “The whole Christian fact is summed up in Christ—as the Messiah who was to come—who had to be prepared for in history, just as a masterpiece is preceded by a series of sketches; but as ‘the image of the invisible

3. Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* 2, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 17–18.

4. John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 301.

5. O'Malley, *What Happened*, 301.

6. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 4, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, 217.



God’ and the ‘firstborn of all creation,’ he is the universal Exemplar.”<sup>7</sup> And, in 1950, Yves Congar wrote this of *ressourcement*: “It is re-interrogating texts, but something more also, and more essential: it is *re-centering upon Christ in his Paschal Mystery*.”<sup>8</sup>

For some forty years, I have insisted that Vatican II’s premier accomplishment was its re-Sourcement: its new realization of Christ as the living center of its faith and life, its vision and mission.<sup>9</sup> In this regard I recall another date of particular significance. On September 29, 1963, Pope Paul VI opened the second session of the Vatican Council with these memorable words: “The starting point and the goal [of the council] is that here and at this very hour we should proclaim Christ to ourselves and to the world around us: Christ our beginning, Christ our life and our guide, Christ our hope and our end.”<sup>10</sup> Paul had succeeded John XXIII the previous June, and the pressing question was whether he would reconvene the council. His decision to do so was welcomed with joy and hope. In this opening address he charted that Christocentric way that would orient and guide the council’s labors.

Vatican’s II’s re-Sourcement sought to know Christ in a new way: to re-discover the person of Jesus Christ—not only through propositions about him but by inviting and fostering a personal encounter with him. An encounter that leads not merely to an assent of the mind but a consent of the heart and, hence, to transformation of life. And it sought to bring that renewed sense of Christ’s reality and primacy into all facets of the Church’s life and its relation to the world—indeed, to proclaim Christ as *lumen*

7. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 173–74.

8. Yves Congar, *Vraie et Fausse Réforme dans l’Eglise* (Paris: Cerf, 1950), 336 (my translation and emphasis).

9. See Andrew Meszaros, “Christocentrism in Theology and Evangelization in the Thought of Robert P. Imbelli,” in Andrew Meszaros, ed., *The Center Is Jesus Christ Himself* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 1–25.

10. Cited in Matthew Levering, *An Introduction to Vatican II as an Ongoing Theological Event* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 1.

*gentium* (light of the nations). For, as *Gaudium et Spes* confesses, with lyric exultation, “The Lord is the goal of human history, the point on which the desires of history and civilization turn, the center of the human race, the joy of all hearts and the fulfillment of all desires.”<sup>11</sup>

In his study of the council, John O’Malley makes the important observation that “the universal call to holiness” weaves through the documents of the council like a golden thread. He suggests that such an emphasis is unique in the history of ecumenical councils. O’Malley writes, “Among the recurring themes of the Council expressive of its spirit, the call to holiness is particularly pervasive and particularly important. . . . It is the theme that to a large extent imbued the council with its finality.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, O’Malley counts this call to holiness a crucial component in what he construes to be Vatican II’s unique “style”—a pastoral, dialogical style—that distinguishes it from all previous councils of the Church.<sup>13</sup> However, has O’Malley’s suggestive insistence on style led him to scant the Christological content of the two *dogmatic* constitutions of the council: *Dei Verbum* and *Lumen Gentium*?

Hence, I would stress, more than O’Malley does, that, for the council, the source and enabler of that call is the Holy One: Jesus Christ himself. The call to holiness has, in the mind and heart of the council, a distinctive Christological foundation. The revelation of the uniqueness of Christ is not primarily a propositional truth for our instruction but an existential summons to transformation of life according to the image of Christ: being clothed with Christ, taking on the mind of Christ, living life in

11. *Gaudium et Spes* 45. John Cavadini comments regarding *Gaudium et Spes*, “It is from this perspective of the recapitulation of man, of *homo*, of the human being, in Christ, that the Church wishes to engage in dialogue with the modern world” (“Christian Conviction Doesn’t Shut Down Dialogue,” *Church Life Journal*, March 17, 2021, churchlifejournal.nd.edu).

12. O’Malley, *What Happened*, 310.

13. For O’Malley’s important consideration of “style” as the true “spirit” of the council, see O’Malley, 43–52 and 305–8.

Christ. Thus the council's call to holiness is an *invitatio in mysterium Christi*, an invitation to enter into the mystery of Christ, and, even more explicitly, an *invitatio ad participandum in mysterium paschale Christi*, an invitation to participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

Thus, among the attributes of Vatican II's distinctive style, besides the biblical, pastoral, and dialogical characteristics, suggested by O'Malley, I would add and underscore "mystagogic." In this regard, chapters 1 and 5 of *Lumen Gentium*, "The Mystery of the Church" and "The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church," are intimately, mystagogically, linked. The call to holiness is the call to appropriate more fully and enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ who is the light of the nations.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, it is imperative to highlight a neglected aspect of Vatican II's achievement: its employment of the term "Paschal Mystery." The term has become so commonplace we fail to attend sufficiently to its innovative appearance and usage at the council.

In an address commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Abbot Jeremy Driscoll noted that Pius XII's encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) "did much to prepare the way for *Sacrosanctum Concilium*; yet, one of the ways of measuring the difference and the progress between the two documents is to note that 'paschal mystery' is never mentioned in *Mediator Dei*."<sup>15</sup> And the "progress" to which Driscoll alludes is well summed up in the title of a book by Father Dominic Langevin: *From Passion to Paschal Mystery*.<sup>16</sup>

14. Pope Francis captures this Christ-centered mystagogy of the council in *Evangelii Gaudium*. He writes, apropos the homily, "Preaching should guide the assembly, and the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist" (138). In addition, he calls for a "kerygmatic and mystagogical catechesis," with special attention paid to the aesthetic, to the "via pulchritudinis" (163–68). For the text of *Evangelii Gaudium*, see [vatican.va](http://vatican.va).

15. Jeremy Driscoll, "Reviewing and Recovering *Sacrosanctum Concilium*," *Origins* 43, no. 29 (December 19, 2013): 479–87, at 486n26.

16. Dominic M. Langevin, OP, *From Passion to Paschal Mystery* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2015).

Langevin's book argues that in Pius XII's treatment of the sacraments, "the accent . . . remained singularly and solely upon the Passion of Christ."<sup>17</sup> Vatican II, however, reaped the fruits of such pioneering work as Louis Bouyer's *Le mystère pascal*<sup>18</sup> and François-Xavier Durrwell's *La résurrection de Jésus, mystère de salut*.<sup>19</sup> The result of such studies, as well as the 1955 reform under Pius XII of the Holy Week liturgies, was that "when the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council assembled, they did not find it difficult to affirm that both the Passion and the Resurrection are mutually salvific."<sup>20</sup>

A salient text is *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5, where the council teaches that "the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God" was accomplished by Christ the Lord "principally by the paschal mystery of His blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious ascension, whereby 'dying, he destroyed our death and, rising, he restored our life.'"<sup>21</sup> Thus the "Paschal Mystery" is both the culmination of Jesus's life and ministry and the cause of our salvation: his dying destroyed *our* death, his rising restored *our* life.

This new realization of the decisive importance of the Paschal Mystery finds striking reflection in the new liturgical books and celebrations stemming from the council's *ressourcement*. Jeremy Driscoll asserts, "There can be no question that one of the great

17. Langevin, *Passion*, 370.

18. Louis Bouyer, *Le mystère pascal*, 2nd rev. ed., *Lex Orandi* 4 (Paris: Cerf, 1947). (The first edition is from 1945.) For English translation, see *The Paschal Mystery: Meditations on the Last Three Days of Holy Week*, trans. Mary Benoit, R.S.M. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951).

19. François-Xavier Durrwell, *La résurrection de Jésus, mystère de salut* (Paris: Mappus, 1950). For English translation, see *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

20. Langevin, *Passion*, 370.

21. Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, 157. Louis Bouyer comments somewhat sardonically about the title of his path-breaking book: "Everyone today imagines it was a current expression among the Fathers of the Church and the Middle Ages. In fact, however, as I pointed out to no effect, while Christian Latin does have *Paschale sacramentum*, it does not have *mysterium paschale*." *The Memoirs of Louis Bouyer*, trans. John Pepino (Kettering, OH: Angelico, 2015), 156.

theological achievements of the Missal of Paul VI is the way in which the paschal mystery emerges with clarity as the center of the liturgical year and, indeed, as the center of every celebration of the Eucharist. . . . In the Missal of Paul VI the word paschal in various of its forms occurs in 120 texts, many of which are repeated numerous times. In the pre-conciliar missal of 1962 it occurs in 17 texts.”<sup>22</sup>

By the late 1980s its appropriation had become so widespread and established that it serves as the organizing principle for the treatment of liturgy and sacraments in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Chapter 1 of part 2 of the *Catechism* is entitled “The Paschal Mystery in the Age of the Church,” and chapter 2 is “The Sacramental Celebration of the Paschal Mystery.”

Pastorally and experientially, in the span of a lifetime, we transitioned from a solemn funeral Mass, whose tone was set by the *Dies Irae*, to a “Mass of the Resurrection” where homily and eulogy (often indistinguishable) sound suspiciously like “*Santo subito!*”

If it was characteristic of preconciliar liturgical understanding to concentrate upon the Passion and Death of the Lord, today Paschal Mystery seems often reduced to the celebration of Christ’s Resurrection. Thus it is commonplace to refer simply to the “Easter Triduum,” instead of the fuller “Paschal Triduum.”

A further remark to which I will return in part 3. Though *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5 helpfully exegetes “Paschal Mystery” as Christ the Lord’s “blessed passion, his resurrection from the dead and his glorious ascension,” in the postconciliar Church, the Ascension seems relegated to a refurbished limbo—just as the liturgical feast wanders in search of a place to lay its head.

Nonetheless, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* can still serve as a beacon as we continue to enter more deeply into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, provided we realize and insist that the *participatio*

22. Driscoll, “Reviewing,” 483.

*plena, conscia, et actiosa* to which it summons has far less to do with liturgical activism, as with the challenge to transformation.<sup>23</sup> It calls all to a *participatio plena, conscia, et actiosa in mysterium paschale Iesu Christi*.

Concluding this section, I recall another significant date: October 11, 2012. Providentially, I was again in Saint Peter's Square for the Mass commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Vatican II. One of the few others present, who had also been there fifty years before, was Pope Benedict XVI. In his homily Benedict stated that the council's deepest desire was "to immerse itself anew in the mystery of Christ" and "to communicate Christ to individuals and to all men and women, in the Church's pilgrimage in history." Benedict insisted that both Paul VI and John Paul II had reaffirmed the council's conviction that Jesus Christ is "the center of the cosmos and history." They advanced the council's "apostolic imperative to proclaim him to the world. . . . For the Christian believes in God whose face was revealed by Jesus Christ."<sup>24</sup>

## II. MISREMEMBERING VATICAN II

I will abbreviate my remarks in this section, since I have elsewhere lamented and attempted to chart the loss of Vatican II's Christological re-Sourcement in many academic and pastoral circles since the council. I characterize this declension from the robust Christological vision of Vatican II as the case of "the decapitated Body."<sup>25</sup>

Among other symptoms of this malady I have pointed to a unitarianism of the Spirit in which the names of "Jesus" and "Father" are expurgated; the not-so-benign neglect accorded *Dei Verbum's* affirmation of Christ as both "mediator and fullness of

23. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14.

24. Benedict XVI, "Homily for the Opening of the Year of Faith," October 11, 2012, [vatican.va](http://vatican.va) (translation modified).

25. Robert P. Imbelli, "No Decapitated Body," *Nova et Vetera* 18, no. 3 (2020): 757–75.

revelation”;<sup>26</sup> the soteriological relativism that places a hesitant question mark after the council’s bold confession of “no other name”;<sup>27</sup> the widespread “liturgical horizontalism” (decried by Benedict XVI) in which almost exclusive focus is placed on the community celebrating—often expressed in the reductive slogan: “What’s important is who is around the altar!”<sup>28</sup>

I contend that this concern about Christological amnesia has animated the theological labors of Joseph Ratzinger—from his 1968 *Introduction to Christianity*,<sup>29</sup> through the statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dominus Iesus* (accorded a frosty reception in many theological circles),<sup>30</sup> to his 2007 volume, *Jesus of Nazareth*, where he calls for a “Christological hermeneutic, which sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the Bible as a unity.”<sup>31</sup> Recently, this concern at the loss of the Christic center spurred the 2021 Lenten sermons of the Preacher of the Papal Household, Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa. He lamented that consideration of the Church often transpires “*etsi Christus non daretur!*”<sup>32</sup> I leave to the reader’s own discernment this diagnosis of Christological deficit in Church and theology, and the identification of further instances of its corrosive spread.<sup>33</sup>

26. *Dei Verbum* 2.

27. *Gaudium et Spes* 10.

28. For further elaboration see Andrew Meszaros, ed., *Center*, 1–25.

29. See Robert P. Imbelli, “Joseph Ratzinger’s ‘Spiritual Christology,’” in *Gift to the Church and World: Fifty Years of Joseph Ratzinger’s ‘Introduction to Christianity,’* ed. John C. Cavadini and Donald Wallenfang (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 189–212, at 198–99. See Essay 4 in this volume.

30. See Robert P. Imbelli, “The Reaffirmation of the Christic Center,” in *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus*, ed. Stephen J. Pope and Charles Hefling (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 96–106.

31. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xix.

32. Raniero Cantalamessa, “Can Any of You Charge Me with Sin?—Jesus Christ, A True Man—Second Lent Sermon,” March 5th, 2021, <http://www.cantalamessa.org>.

33. For an acute study of the spread after the council, in some Catholic circles, of theological liberalism, with its reductionist Christology, see Matthew Levering, introduction and conclusion to *Newman on Doctrinal Corruption* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2022).

### III. THE PASCHAL REKINDLING OF THE CATHOLIC IMAGINARY

In the last part of this essay, I offer some thoughts which build upon and develop what I have been arguing is crucial to the achievement of the Second Vatican Council: its return to the origin and sustaining source of the Church's life, Jesus Christ himself. I do so by accenting the importance of two pillars of Christian faith: Ascension and Transfiguration. And, borrowing from Charles Taylor's use of the notion of the "social imaginary"<sup>34</sup>—that complex network of symbols, images, and concepts that articulate and orient a community's understanding of reality—I suggest that the Ascension and Transfiguration are critical dimensions of a rekindled ecclesial imaginary. Poets, musicians, liturgists, even theologians must realize (in Newman's strong sense of "realize") and re-imagine these two inexhaustible mysteries of the faith. Realize by reimagining.<sup>35</sup>

An essential moment in such realization is to insist, with *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5, that Christ's Paschal Mystery embraces the Ascension: "the paschal mystery of Christ's blessed passion, his resurrection from the dead and his glorious ascension." The Ascension is the very *telos* of the Incarnation. It is not a "post-script" to the life of Christ, but its salvific fulfillment. Ascending, Jesus Christ "opens the gates of heaven." Indeed, heaven is Christologically constituted. As Joseph Ratzinger wrote in *Introduction to Christianity*, "Heaven and the Ascension of Christ are indivisibly connected; it is only this connection that makes clear the Christological, personal, history-centered meaning of the Christian tidings of heaven."<sup>36</sup>

34. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap), 171–76.

35. For the importance of the "imagination" in Louis Bouyer's theological epistemology (as it had been for his fellow Oratorian John Henry Newman), see Keith Lemna's study *The Apocalypse of Wisdom: Louis Bouyer's Theological Recovery of the Cosmos* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico, 2019), chapter 1: "Imagination and Wisdom."

36. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 313.



Christ's Ascension constitutes a new redeemed order of existence, a re-configuration of space and time, centered around the person of Jesus Christ, which is the present visible order brought to transfigured fulfillment.

Moreover, contrary to an impoverished imaginary, which "pictures" the Ascension as Jesus's absence, almost as though he were on a much deserved "sabbatical," a deeper perception realizes with Benedict XVI that he "has not 'gone away,' but now and forever by God's own power, he is present with us and for us. . . . His going away is in this sense a coming, a new form of closeness, of continuing presence."<sup>37</sup>

This "continuing presence" of the ascended Lord is not a static presence but an active, dynamic one. Christ's presence is both transcendent and transformative. He is the Head upon whom the Body remains ever dependent for its supernatural life. As Benedict insists in his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, "Christ himself continues to be present and active in his Church, starting with her vital center which is the Eucharist. . . . For the Eucharist is Christ himself who gives himself to us and continually build us up as his body."<sup>38</sup> Without this sustaining, life-giving presence of its Lord, the body has no life in it. A decapitated body is only a corpse.

Paul Griffiths rightly accents this nexus between Ascension and Eucharist: "The principal condition of the possibility of the Eucharist is exactly that Jesus has ascended. . . . After the Ascension, his flesh, veiled as bread, and his blood, veiled as wine, can be touched and tasted everywhere and at once, without constraint by the metronome of time or the map grid of space."<sup>39</sup>

37. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 283.

38. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* 12, 14, apostolic exhortation, February 22, 2007, vatican.va.

39. Paul J. Griffiths, *Christian Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 51.

And in the great tradition's vision of reality, the Ascension is the *telos* not only of the Head but of the members of his Body as well. The Collect for the Mass of the Lord's Ascension prays, "Where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope" (in the terse Latin: "*quo processit gloria capitis, eo spes vocatur et corporis*").

In the rich Catholic imaginary of a former age, Dante Alighieri launches his pilgrim into the heights of *Paradiso* by boldly announcing in the very first canto the theme of this concluding portion of his pilgrimage: "trasumanar"<sup>40</sup> (transformation beyond the human).<sup>41</sup> And the final sublime canto of the entire *Commedia* poeticizes Dante's transforming vision of the Trinity. To his astonishment the pilgrim discerns that the second of the revolving circles bears a human imprint: "*la nostra effige*."<sup>42</sup> The graced destiny of the pilgrim/poet's transfiguring journey is divinization. And the condition for its possibility is the Ascension of the Incarnate Word.

Seven centuries later, Charles Taylor, in a little noticed retrieval, challenges a secular age to recover a sense of *theosis*. To move beyond merely human flourishing to that "further greater transformation"<sup>43</sup> that breaks through the constricted and ultimately dehumanizing "immanent frame." It entails a purification of the spiritual senses that enables one to perceive, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins (whom Taylor invokes in his final chapter "Conversions"), that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God"<sup>44</sup> and that "Christ plays in ten thousand

40. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 1.70.

41. "Trasumanar": Dante's neologism; literally to pass beyond the human.

42. Dante, *Paradiso* 33.131.

43. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 737.

44. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," Poetry Foundation, poetryfoundation.

places / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces."<sup>45</sup>

Christ's Ascension has definitively broken the bounds of the "immanent frame" and inaugurated the new creation of humanity's transfiguration in the glory of God. As the Collect for the Mass of the Ascension proclaims, "The Ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation!" The Ascension brings into bold relief the unique headship of Jesus Christ and founds the new identity of Christians as members of his Body.

In a rich and stimulating study on the theology of the Ascension, Douglas Farrow writes,

The Ascension of Jesus is the act by which God in principle—or rather in Person—completes the formation of man and perfects his image in man. In bearing our humanity home to the Father, Jesus brings human nature as such to its true end and to its fullest potential in the Holy Spirit. He causes it to be entirely at one with God, and so become the object and (for other creatures) the mediator of God's eternal blessing.<sup>46</sup>

That "perfected created image" of the Triune God is not the Head alone but the Head together with the members, forming the *totus Christus*, beloved of Augustine. It is the new, supernatural order of redeemed and transfigured relations which is vividly imagined and celebrated in the final chapters of the book of Revelation.

What "interpretation of reality" is offered by an "ecclesial imaginary" that sees and confesses Christ's Ascension as integral to his Paschal Mystery and that sees transfigured humanity as a perfected image of its Creator? It is a vision of reality as *constitutively relational*, of *being as communion*. Few have realized so fully the generative and transforming power of the Paschal Mystery and its

45. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," Poetry Foundation, poetry-foundation.org.

46. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 122.

implications for Church and theology as clearly as Louis Bouyer. In his pioneering work, *Le Mystère pascal* of 1945, Bouyer has a chapter on believers' oneness in Christ that is as bold as Augustine. Bouyer writes, "By our new and supernatural subsistence in Christ, founded upon the Incarnation and conserved in all of us by the Eucharist, we form a single new being in the body of Christ, or, more profoundly still, in the whole Christ, in the plenitude of Christ. . . . New relations are established between us, uniting us indissolubly, since henceforth we all have no longer but a single life—that of Christ in us."<sup>47</sup>

Allow me, in closing, to recall one final date: July 24, 1965, two months before the start of the council's last session: the day of my ordination to the priesthood—a priesthood lived in the light of Vatican II's re-Sourcement.

In preparation for ordination, I had two commemorative cards printed. The first offered a quote from the Letter to the Ephesians: "Christ gifted some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to that perfect man [*eis andra teleion*], to the measure of the stature of the fullness [*plērōmatos*] of Christ" (Eph. 4:11–13). That perfected image of God who is the whole Christ come to fulfillment.

The second card displayed a quote from Saint Augustine's *Homilies on the First Letter of John*:

The sons of God are the body of the unique Son of God. And since he is the head and we the members, the Son of God is one. Thus he who loves the sons of God loves the Son of God. . . . Who are the sons of God? The members of the Son

47. Louis Bouyer, *The Paschal Mystery*, trans. Sister Mary Benoit (Chicago: Regnery, 1950), 121.

of God. And by loving, she herself becomes a member, and through loving is joined to the body of Christ. And there shall be one Christ, loving himself.

I already intuited then, and am even more convinced now, that a rich Christological ontology is adumbrated here—a joyful and hopeful vision of reality, yearning to be more fully imagined and realized.<sup>48</sup>

48. A significant contribution is Klaus Hemmerle, *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico, 2020). Hemmerle writes concerning “substances” that they . . . “go beyond” themselves “in relation.” “Substance there comes to ‘transubstantiation,’ to ‘communion’” (44).

## 2. “Christ Brings All Newness”

### The Irenaean Vision of *Evangelii Gaudium*

The Second Vatican Council is universally considered the most important ecclesial event of the twentieth century. And its importance has been newly highlighted by the historic canonization of two of its most significant participants: Pope Saint John XXIII and Pope Saint John Paul II. The first whose inspiration convened the council; the second who was both participant and its authoritative interpreter.

As is well known, the rhythm which governed the council’s deliberations and labors was that of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*. The recovery of the wellsprings of Christian faith in the Sacred Scriptures and in the theological witness of the Fathers of the Church inspired the urgency to communicate the faith afresh to the modern world. In effect, Vatican II signaled a desire and commitment for a New Evangelization. No less an authority than Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “The objectives of [the council] are definitively summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better suited to proclaim the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Paul VI showed his keen awareness of the imperative to continue the conciliar dynamic of *ressourcement* / *aggiornamento*. He wrote, “[The local churches] have the task of

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1. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 2, December 8, 1975, vatican.va. It is noteworthy that in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis cites *Evangelii Nuntiandi* a dozen times.

assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into the language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language.”<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Pope Francis displays a like commitment to the creative tension of “appropriation” and “translation.” In the section of *Evangelii Gaudium* dedicated to “Preparing to Preach,”<sup>3</sup> the pope creatively applies this basic rhythm to the task of preaching. He writes, simply but profoundly, “A preacher has to contemplate the Word, but he also has to contemplate his people.”<sup>4</sup>

This twofold contemplation, this double discernment, structures the preacher’s craft, and the homily is its most concrete fruit. But though these contemplative exercises are inseparable, they are not equally primary. The first, the contemplation of the Word, has primacy, as becomes clear in the following section of the apostolic exhortation: “Evangelization and the Deeper Understanding of the Kerygma.”<sup>5</sup> Here Pope Francis insists, “[The kerygma] needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal.”<sup>6</sup> And he states unequivocally, “All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma which is reflected in and constantly illumines the work of catechesis, thereby enabling us to understand more fully the significance of every subject treated.”<sup>7</sup>

Though the pope in these sections of *Evangelii Gaudium* speaks explicitly of the tasks of preaching and catechesis, I contend that the principles he invokes apply equally to the task of theology. Like preaching and catechesis, the theological task is to enter more deeply into the apostolic kerygma. For the kerygma,

2. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 63.

3. See Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 145–59, apostolic exhortation, November 24, 2013, vatican.va.

4. *Evangelii Gaudium* 154.

5. *Evangelii Gaudium* 160–75.

6. *Evangelii Gaudium* 164.

7. *Evangelii Gaudium* 165.

the primordial and fundamental proclamation of the Gospel, lies at the very heart of the Church's mission. The Church's *raison d'être* is to live and proclaim the joy at the heart of the Gospel: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and free you."<sup>8</sup> Thus every ecclesial activity—preaching, catechizing, theological reflection—must have its ongoing point of reference and norm in this apostolic kerygma.

In the face of those who tend to sunder catechesis and theology (seeking thereby, so they suppose, to safeguard the proper role of theological reflection), *Evangelii Gaudium* points to a deeper continuity. For catechesis and theology are rooted in the Trinitarian kerygma of God's love for the world incarnated and revealed through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The conciliar rhythm of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, the homiletic rhythm of appropriation and translation, characterizes the theological task as well. But what may have been neglected in the years since the council is that the deepest *ressourcement* is, in reality, a re-Sourcement: a return to the unique Source who is Jesus Christ. Vatican II has been called, with some justification, an "ecclesiological council"—given that two of its constitutions (*Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*) address the nature and mission of the Church, while a third (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) treats at length the Church's liturgy. But this fact can also conceal how Christologically saturated the documents of the council are. After all, the "Light of the Nations" is not the Church but Jesus Christ to whom the Church bears witness. And the ongoing need for purification and reform in the Church is so that she might be better conformed to Christ her Lord.

In this regard, I maintain that though the four constitutions of the council bear the most authority among its documents, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*,

8. *Evangelii Gaudium* 154.



enjoys the status of a *prima inter pares*. The reason is simple: without the recognition and confession that Jesus Christ is the “mediator and fullness of all revelation,”<sup>9</sup> the Church, the Body of Christ, would have no distinctive identity and her liturgy would lack any sure foundation. All the teaching of the council is governed by this Christological “depth grammar” that confesses the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ.

Much has been accomplished since the council in the areas of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The council has certainly advanced mutual understanding and respect among Christians and believers in other religious traditions. But this notable gain has sometimes come at the cost of compromising significant distinctions and differences. Thus the uniqueness and originality of Jesus has at times not received due attention. It has even been attenuated. Furthermore, polarization within the Church itself has played a role in neglecting or ignoring the council’s robust Christocentricity.

One can sense the anguish with which Benedict XVI composed the foreword to the first volume of his book *Jesus of Nazareth*. The pope wrote about the effect of some historical-critical studies: “Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.”<sup>10</sup> While Benedict XVI’s immediate concern was the inner life of the Christian community, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles lamented the harmful effect of certain theological approaches and stances upon the Church’s evangelizing mission. Dulles spoke of tendencies in contemporary Catholic theology “that inhibit a vigorous program of evangelization” by positing a “soteriological pluralism”: different ways of salvation

9. Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* 2, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 17–18.

10. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xii.

for different peoples and cultures, rather than the unique Way who is Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

In this theological and cultural context the opening words of *Evangelii Gaudium* provide a clarion call to return to the living center of the faith. Pope Francis writes, “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.”<sup>12</sup>

Now, beyond this stirring proclamation of the kerygma, Pope Francis also makes a theological claim of surpassing importance. He does so by quoting the evocative declaration of the second-century Father of the Church Saint Irenaeus of Lyons. Irenaeus writes, “By his coming Christ brought with him all newness.”<sup>13</sup> So reads the English translation. But the Latin version is even richer and more concentrated: *Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens*. Christ brought all newness, in bringing *himself*! It is the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, who is the *novissimus*, the *eschatos*, both “alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13).

Thus a theology apt for the New Evangelization must retrieve and extend this newness which makes Christianity distinctive among the world religions. Or, better, theology for the New Evangelization must become Christocentric in a more daring and comprehensive manner.<sup>14</sup> In this light one may envision the theological task as not only “faith seeking understanding” (in Saint Anselm’s classic formulation) but also as “hope seeking understanding.” This latter expression derives from the oft-quoted verse of the First Letter of Peter: “Always be prepared to offer an account (*logos*) of the hope that is in you to anyone who inquires of

11. Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist, 2009), 81, 85.

12. *Evangelii Gaudium* 1.

13. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.34.1, quoted in *Evangelii Gaudium* 11.

14. There are helpful essays in Paolo Scarafoni, ed., *Christocentrismo: Riflessione Teologica* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2002).

you” (1 Pet. 3:15). And it is clear that this hope, which defines the Christian way of life, is founded upon “the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3).

Moreover, Christian life is not only the expectation of a future consummation of our hope, but the present experience of the loving encounter with the risen and ascended Jesus. Peter bears witness to the experience of the early Christian community: “Though you have not seen Jesus, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and you rejoice with unutterable and exceeding joy; thus you attain the goal [*telos*] of your faith: the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet. 1:8–9). The successor of Peter echoes this when he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, a theology that serves the New Evangelization may rightly be characterized as “love seeking greater understanding.” By thus rooting the theological task in the soil of faith, hope, and love, one not only underscores the Christological basis of faith, hope, and love, one also accents the inseparability of theology and spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

*Evangelii Gaudium* is certainly not a theological treatise. But, as I have been suggesting, it sketches a theology of a markedly Irenaean tenor. In that same Irenaean spirit, Professor Khaled Anatolios, my colleague at Boston College, has spoken of theology as “ordered discourse on the newness of Christ and of the renewal of all things in Christ.”<sup>17</sup> It is well known how central to Irenaeus’s thought is the Pauline notion of the “recapitulation of all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:10). One of the challenges facing theology

15. *Evangelii Gaudium* 264.

16. See the essays in Piero Coda and Vincenzo Di Pilato, eds., *Teologia “in” Gesù* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2012).

17. Khaled Anatolios, “A Patristic Reflection on the Nature and Method of Theology in the New Evangelization,” *Nova et Vetera* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 1070–71. For his study of the “primacy of Christ” as the determinative norm in the development of Nicene Trinitarian doctrine, see Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

today is to offer a comprehensive vision of reality based upon the primacy of Christ: a “Christological ontology,” if you will. Only such a theology can provide the requisite support for *Evangelii Gaudium*’s comprehensive vision of evangelization.

But here another similarity with Irenaeus arises. For we find ourselves in a spiritual and cultural context that, on more than one count, resembles that which confronted Irenaeus in the second century. The proclamation and witness to the faith today transpires in a context of a recrudescing Gnosticism that assumes many guises and disguises. Superficially, there may seem to be little affinity between the overblown metaphysical systems of second-century Gnosticism and the cool skepticism regarding universal claims and grand narratives that characterizes postmodernity. Yet in the “evangelical discernment”<sup>18</sup> that Pope Francis initiates in chapter 2 of the apostolic exhortation, he himself refers to the ongoing “attraction of Gnosticism.” He defines this as “a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings.”<sup>19</sup>

Like classical Gnosticism, the contemporary manifestation displays an aversion to the material and bodily, preferring “a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross,”<sup>20</sup> “a disembodied Jesus who demands nothing of us with regard to others.”<sup>21</sup> This Gnostic temptation is further reinforced and skewed by a culture and social order so often marred by “an economy of exclusion and inequality.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the imperatives of consumer capitalism lead to a “denial of the primacy of the human person”<sup>23</sup>

18. *Evangelii Gaudium* 50.

19. *Evangelii Gaudium* 94.

20. *Evangelii Gaudium* 88.

21. *Evangelii Gaudium* 89.

22. *Evangelii Gaudium* 53.

23. *Evangelii Gaudium* 55.

so that “human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded.”<sup>24</sup>

As in the first century, so today the proclamation of the Gospel must often transpire, especially in the North Atlantic world, in a context that seems “devoid of hope, without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). And the loss of God is accompanied by the loss of a substantive self. It comes as no surprise, then, that studies have been published over the past few decades, in the English-speaking world, bearing titles like *The Minimal Self* and *The Protean Self*. They depict “selves” uneasy with relationships and wary of binding commitments. Little wonder that so many marriages end in separation and divorce.

The British literary scholar and cultural critic Terry Eagleton has written an intriguing book entitled *Culture and the Death of God*. He speaks of the “spiritual vacuity” of late capitalist society in which men and women are either exploited or reduced to being consumers who are “passive, diffuse, provisional.” The sole foundational certitude of “Man the Eternal Consumer” seems to be “I buy therefore I am.” In biting words Eagleton writes, “With the advent of postmodern culture, a nostalgia for the numinous is finally banished. It is not so much that there is no redemption as there is nothing to be redeemed. . . . With the emergence of postmodernism, human history arrives for the first time at an authentic atheism.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, in his view, “Postmodernism is in many ways a postscript to Nietzsche.”<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, there are other cultural contexts (even in the North American world) to which the Church must proclaim the joy of the Gospel. However, through globalization, the consumerist and therapeutic frenzy of late capitalism is spreading apace. As Pope Francis asserts, “In the prevailing culture, priority is given to the

24. *Evangelii Gaudium* 53.

25. Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 190.

26. Eagleton, *Culture*, 185.

outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional.”<sup>27</sup> And the consequence is that “the individualism of our postmodern and globalized era favors a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds.”<sup>28</sup>

In his massive study *A Secular Age*, the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor traces the emergence of secularity in modernity. A significant strength of his study lies in his clear appreciation of the real gains that secularization has brought in terms of respect for individual rights and fostering freedom of religion. Therefore, Taylor’s recognition of the weaknesses of secularity and its devolution in postmodernity is all the more credible. One of his primary concerns is the attitude he calls “excarination,” an attitude that takes a number of forms. At its most basic, excarnation is the implicit denial of our embodiedness, our constitutive relationality, our vulnerability and mortality. In the face of pervasive excarnational forces in contemporary culture, Taylor contends that Christianity (and Catholicism in particular) must labor “to recover a sense of what the Incarnation can mean.”<sup>29</sup>

With this notion of “excarination,” we then rejoin the recognition of the Gnosticizing tendencies latent in so much of our consumerist-driven and privatizing secular culture. These tendencies have been noted and lifted up by figures as diverse as Pope Francis, the cultural critic Terry Eagleton, and the philosopher Charles Taylor. They offer independent and converging discernments regarding the spirits animating so much of contemporary culture. And not all the spirits are beneficent!

Confronted with this situation, Christians turn to the scriptural imperatives as criteria for discernment. Foremost among these is the injunction in the First Letter of John: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they

27. *Evangelii Gaudium* 62.

28. *Evangelii Gaudium* 67.

29. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 753.

are of God. . . . By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God” (1 John 4:1–2). Incarnation, not excarnation, is the first and primary test. But the second extends our understanding of Incarnation to embrace not only the incarnate Son of God but also his Eucharistic Body and his ecclesial Body. Thus, Paul writes, “Let each examine himself or herself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon themselves” (1 Cor. 11:28–29). It is clear that Paul’s discernment concerns both the Lord’s Eucharistic Body and his ecclesial Body that is being sundered between those who suffer physical hunger and those who feast, like Dives, in abundance.

A final New Testament injunction regarding discernment is relevant. Paul exhorts the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God: what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). And the proof of their genuine discernment is that they present their bodies “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1).

From these three passages, we can gather three precious criteria of discernment. The principle and foundation is the faith-filled confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. The second is the recognition of the inseparable connection between confession of the lordship of Jesus and realization of his presence in the Eucharist and in the community that worships in his name. Finally, Christians as members of the Body of Christ must both incorporate his once-and-for-all sacrifice in their daily sacrificial living and be a witness to an often hostile world by their transformed existence. Thus, on every count, the Christian way bespeaks incarnation, not excarnation.

The three criteria we have briefly recalled are operative in Pope Francis’s “evangelical discernment” throughout *Evangelii*

*Gaudium*, but they have a particular prominence in chapter 4, which treats “The Social Dimension of Evangelization.” He insists that to restrict the salvation wrought in Christ to the private sphere or the purview of the individual is to impoverish Christ’s redemptive action. In a striking assertion, the pope writes, “God’s word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us: ‘As you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me’ (Matt. 25:40).”<sup>30</sup>

In explicating further, the sense he gives to “the prolongation of the incarnation,” Pope Francis draws upon a theme so dear to Saint Irenaeus: that of recapitulation. He insists that salvation concerns the whole person in every aspect of his life, both in this world and in the world to come. The pope writes, “This is the principle of universality intrinsic to the Gospel, for the Father desires the salvation of every man and woman, and his saving plan consists in ‘gathering up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph. 1:10).”<sup>31</sup>

This “recapitulation” of all things in Christ, putting all under the headship of Christ, is ingredient to the newness that Jesus brings in bringing himself. It bespeaks not merely a moral solidarity but an ontological solidarity in which men and women find their truest identity as members of the Body of Christ and thus members of one another. To recognize this new reality requires a true metanoia, a new consciousness and practice. Indeed, it requires “a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.”<sup>32</sup>

Hence all catechetical and theological renewal must be governed by the “epistemic primacy,” the absolute *novum* of Jesus

30. *Evangelii Gaudium* 179.

31. *Evangelii Gaudium* 181.

32. *Evangelii Gaudium* 188.



Christ.<sup>33</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, from first to last, honors this epistemic primacy of Jesus Christ. Further, it meets Charles Taylor’s challenge by setting forth a program of evangelization that offers a comprehensive outline of what the Incarnation means and what its implications are. *Evangelii Gaudium*’s Catholic vision embraces the personal, the social, the economic, and the political. It counters the Gnostic temptation of “excarnation” today, as Irenaeus did in the second century. The Church in this sublime vision serves not only as a “field hospital” but also as a “contrast society.”<sup>34</sup>

33. For a careful development of the notion of “epistemic primacy,” see Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For its applicability to the Christian theology of religions, see George R. Sumner, *The First and the Last: The Claim of Jesus Christ and the Claims of Other Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

34. I have developed these ideas at greater length in my book *Rekindling the Christic Imagination: Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014).