

SYNODALITY, SOCIOLOGISM, AND THE JUDGMENT OF HISTORY

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“The Christian life and the Church’s evangelizing mission are not administrative programs but a culture and way of life.”



THE UNRESOLVED CRISIS OF CATHOLIC MODERNISMS

It is almost universally agreed, even among those who agree upon virtually nothing else, that the Catholic Church is in great crisis.¹ Our failure to apprehend and agree upon the nature of this crisis is one of its most telling symptoms. For it reveals that beneath all the myriad descriptions that might be offered—a crisis of clerical abuse, of authority, and so on—there is a crisis of interpretation, and therefore of metaphysics and theology if not

1. A notable exception can be found in Jean-Luc Marion, *A Brief Apology for a Catholic Moment*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). My assessment of Marion’s argument can be found in “Beyond Integralism and Progressivism,” *First Things*, July 13, 2021, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/07/beyond-integralism-and-progressivism>.

indeed their basic anthropological and ontological preconditions as forms of thought. Many now speak openly and even eagerly of schism, citing opposition to Pope Francis, rejection of the Second Vatican Council or the Mass of Paul VI as the point of rupture. Whatever one thinks of these external signs, there is an internal schism in the Catholic perception of God and the world and indeed over whether there can really *be* a Catholic perception of God and the world, though it is safe to say that few of the protagonists on either side are aware that this is what is really at stake.² John Paul II and Benedict XVI identified its essence in speaking of the eclipse of the sense of God and man. We could also call it the problem of anonymous atheism inasmuch as the eclipse has robbed us of the light to recognize our irreligion.³ To acknowledge this eclipse is immediately to set aside at least one of the conventional, empirical descriptions of this schism as a

2. Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 2017), 230 (emphasis original): “Elsewhere, I have argued that contemporary history can only be interpreted, from the ideal standpoint, as the expansion of atheism, since it is characteristic of atheistic thought not to remain enclosed in a theoretical formulation but to surpass itself into practice, in a manner analogous to the way in which medieval thought surpassed itself into mysticism. I also argued that this history has gone through two stages, that of secular religion—the period between the wars—and that of natural irreligion—the period after the war. The peculiarity of this second form of atheism is that it does not call itself explicitly atheistic, because it limits itself to what is verifiable, making no pronouncements about the unverifiable. In this way, it has been able to generate in some Catholics the delusion that it can be reconciled with a demythologized form of religion, which through this demythologization becomes ‘really pure.’ But I also clarified that this is a delusion, because the form of thought that we can call, interchangeably, pan-technistic or sociologicistic or neo-positivistic or neo-pragmaticistic (in the sense of pragmatism rigorously separated from spiritualism), due to its professed relativism about values and the concrete evaluations it leads to, replaces a direct struggle against religion with an indirect one and thereby endangers religion even more, because it erodes the religious dimension until it erases from consciousness all traces of the question of God.” “Because what must matter to Catholics in public life today is certainly not their own power, nor the temporal power of the Church, and not even—as far as politics and the party are concerned—the work of the apostolate. What matters is *rather the preservation of that religious dimension connatural to the human spirit which, on the one hand, is the only ground on which the action of Grace can bear fruit and, on the other hand, is the only condition to save the world from catastrophe*” (ibid., 233, emphasis original).

3. As Del Noce says, “After being so freed Marxism reaches a much deeper form of irreligiosity than atheistic negation, and in this form it allies itself with the bourgeois-secular spirit pushed to its final conclusion” (ibid., 242).

division of mere “methodologies” between those who prioritize a metaphysical approach and those who prioritize a historical approach to fundamental questions. There *is* no “outside” of metaphysics and theology. Any attempt to give priority to historicity is not an alternative *to* metaphysics and theology; it is an alternative metaphysics and theology, even if this is unarticulated or unknown to its adherents.⁴

This internal schism is not new. It is older than the present pontificate, older, in fact, than Vatican II, which it partly helped to occasion and which the council attempted to transcend. This means that the internal schism is not simply about the pope or the council, as those who are promoting it would have it, and that present external divisions do not map neatly onto it. Maurice Blondel wrote of it over a century ago, sixty years before the council, in words that could have been written for today.

With every day that passes, the conflict between tendencies which set Catholic against Catholic in every order—social, political, philosophical—is revealed as sharper and more general. One could almost say that there are now two quite incompatible “Catholic mentalities.” . . . And that is manifestly abnormal, since there cannot be two Catholicisms.⁵

Blondel was writing, of course, of what we now call the modernist crisis. I do not wish to suggest that this is the precise point of origin for today’s crisis, given that our crisis is a stream fed by many underground springs, nor do I wish simply to identify them. Much has transpired in the interim, not least the political history of the twentieth century and the attempt, partly but substantially inspired by Blondel, to overcome the division between the two tendencies by affirming what is true in each of them.⁶ Yet the modernist crisis

4. See Michael Hanby, *No God, No Science? Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 9–48.

5. Maurice Blondel, “History and Dogma,” in *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 221.

6. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 89: “This Modernism, I said, does not intend to be heretical. Indeed, it has nothing in common with Modernism à la Loisy’s, which envisioned a peaceful transition from the Catholic religion

was a decisive moment insofar as its core dilemma remains unresolved.

Augusto Del Noce maintains that the progressive “neo-Modernism” that emerged after the Second World War is not identical to the older, turn-of-the-century modernism, even if it pushes the metaphysics of the earlier iteration to its most radical conclusion. “Here it should be emphasized that recent progressivism *does not start* at all from the results that had already been achieved by old Modernism—which around 1930 seemed permanently extinguished—but *encounters* it.”⁷ It encounters it rather because of the realization in the interim of “Marx’s statement that his conception is a philosophy that *becomes world*, that is, that surpasses itself into political realization and finds there its verification.”⁸ This is not to say that Catholic progressivism is self-consciously Marxist. Indeed, on Del Noce’s reading it is the destiny of Marxism to decompose into sociologism, thus yielding to technological society and realizing itself in the pure bourgeois. It is rather to say that it takes for granted, both epistemologically and ontologically, the modern break with the Augustinian-Thomist tradition of Christian Platonism of which Marxism is an exemplar. Thus, it necessarily commences

to a religion of humanity without mysteries and without miracles. Instead, it is an effort to write an imitation of Christ for the use of modern man, in the words of one of Teilhard’s admirers, who did justice to his intentions. Let us also grant that we cannot speak of a direct continuation of the Modernism of the early years of this century. But, having said that, we must acknowledge that it is just as true that the new Modernism goes back to the ideas of the old, through the mediation of a process of thought prompted by political history. This brings us to examine the new Catholic position starting from its genesis, which is actually the best way to define its significance and value. It arose in France in the darkest years of the Second World War, as a rediscovery of the hope when everything seemed to justify despair. It is natural that at that time Nazism was, so to speak, abstracted from the historical context in which it was born, becoming the sum total of all the evils that had threatened the journey of civilization, and that from this perspective Communism tended, instead, to change from being an ally *de facto*, due to the historical circumstances, to being an ally *de jure*.”

7. *Ibid.*, 250. I deviate somewhat from Del Noce in regarding Marxism as the exemplar of this “ideal history.” See my “American Revolution as Total Revolution: Del Noce and the American Experiment,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 450–86.

8. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 236 (emphasis original).

from what is fundamentally—but not *merely*—a political position, that is, one in which relations of power detached from transcendent truth and goodness are given methodological, epistemic, and ultimately ontological priority.⁹

Here we can begin to see the points of continuity between our present situation and the original modernist crisis, whose fundamental parameters were laid out in Blondel's contrast between what he called "extrinsicism" (or veterism) and "historicism."¹⁰ The distinction denotes not simply two ecclesiastical or exegetical styles, or even two political ideologies—although each has periodically aligned itself with various left and right of center political movements. Rather, it indicates two vastly different sets of metaphysical presuppositions and judgments with profound and far-reaching implications for the doctrine of God, Christology, and the very nature and life of the Church.

The core philosophical questions at issue in the modernist controversy are vast and extend to many other questions, including the interminable debate over grace and nature and the newly invigorated argument over integralism. At the risk of gross oversimplification, we can say for our purposes here that extrinsicism valorizes eternity at the expense of time and history. The essential problem with this standpoint becomes apparent in one of the flashpoints of the original debate: the rationalistic interpretation given by some neo-Thomists to Vatican I's teaching about our capacity to know God by the "natural light of reason."¹¹ If the relation of reason to being is essentially ahistorical, if the intellect has an immediate intuitive grasp of the first principles of being and an actual demonstrative knowledge of God's existence, Blondel reasoned, then several consequences follow. First,

9. See *ibid.*, 236–66. This "decomposition" is "why, in neo-Modernism, Marxist elements intermingle with those of the worst kind of Americanism" (*ibid.*, 254).

10. See Blondel, "History and Dogma," 226–64.

11. *Dei Filius*, 2. Blondel did not accept that "this 'childish,' 'ridiculous' theory of 'immediately ontological theoretical knowing, permitting the manipulation of reality by deduction from concepts'" was really the teaching of St. Thomas, which he regarded as much closer to his own position (Maurice Blondel, "The Third 'Testis' Article," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26, no. 4 [Winter 1999]: 853).

to be in possession of these principles would be to pre-comprehend every future problem with the Thomist system of thought. It would mean that the historical development of civilization, science, and philosophy could present the Catholic mind with no new questions. Second, if the intellect possesses these principles in pristine, ahistorical isolation, then the failure somehow to possess this understanding must be due merely to a moral fault, a failure of will in the face of an obvious truth.¹² Just as on these terms there can be no real questions that are not already pre-comprehended, there can be no real *penetration* of history by the Church nor any real engagement with the challenge of history or the modern world. There can only be an increasingly unintelligible denunciation of modernity from a position falsely presumed to be outside of it and an authoritarian imposition of those truths thought to exceed natural reason—and perhaps an instrumental use of secular power to enforce them—from this same extrinsic standpoint.¹³ This was an especially tempting position especially for Catholic reactionaries in the Third Republic, but it seems to be a recurring temptation for a resurgent traditionalism today.¹⁴

Historicism, by contrast, is premised upon a false absolutization of history itself, one that forgets that academic or “scientific” history as a thought form “depends upon a number of other sciences,” that it “remains dependent upon ulterior problems, on

12. Blondel, “The Third ‘Testis’ Article,” 851.

13. As Blondel put it in “History and Dogma,” “Thus the relation of the sign to the thing signified is extrinsic; the relation of the facts to the theology superimposed upon them is extrinsic, and extrinsic too is the link between our thought and our life and the truths proposed to us from outside. Such, in its naked poverty, is extrinsicism—it lacks the strength to make life circulate between faith and dogma or between dogma and faith, and allows them turn by turn to fall tyrannically upon the other” (228). Likewise, in “The Third ‘Testis’ Article,” he writes, “To study and care for men and peoples, it is not sufficient to treat them as walking syllogisms, to refute errors demonstratively, by dialectical and didactic means to established truths which impose themselves as fixed structures like ‘an unchangeable essence,’ but that it is still necessary to consider the historical and economic evolution, to envisage the science of human perspectives, to rely on the slow maturation of problems, to aid the fumbings, to follow the work of implicit thought and carry it through to the end” (850).

14. See Michael Hanby, “For and Against Integralism,” *First Things*, March 2020, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/03/for-and-against-integralism>.

sciences that it can neither supplant nor replace except by a usurpation and by falsely proclaiming itself a sort of total metaphysics, a universal vision, a *Weltanschauung*.”¹⁵ This “total metaphysics,” though absolute, is often implicit. “In default of an explicit philosophy, a man ordinarily adopts an unconscious one.”¹⁶

It should never be supposed therefore that real history by itself can know a fact which would be no more than a fact, and that would be the whole fact: each link in the chain, and the chain as a whole, involves the psychological and moral problems implied by the least action or testimony. It is easy enough to see why. Real history [as opposed to the abstraction that is “scientific” history] is composed of human lives; and human life is metaphysics in act. To claim to constitute the science of history without any speculative preoccupation, or even to suppose that the humblest details of history could be, in the strict sense of the word, a simple matter of observation, is to be influenced by prejudices on the pretext of attaining an impossible neutrality—prejudices such as everyone inevitably has so long as he has not attained a conscious view of his own attitude of mind and subjected the postulates in which his researches are based to a methodical criticism.¹⁷

Del Noce’s critique of progressive Catholicism and its “anti-Platonism” shows how the “total metaphysics” of historicism dissolves the order of being into the flux of time and history, no longer understood as the participation of finite and mutable beings in the intelligibility and immutability of eternal being, but as a linear series of noncompossible instants. In consequence, it transposes the vertical transcendence of eternity into the horizontal transcendence of futurity, not unlike the utopianism of Marxism and pragmatism which it now unwittingly shares. The reduction of being to history—reinforced by the modern physics of force, the new philosophies of history, and the triumph of evolutionary theory in biology in the nineteenth century—dissolves the transcendent orders of nature and truth into an assemblage of social, psychological, biological, and economic conditions. Del

15. Blondel, “History and Dogma,” 234.

16. *Ibid.*, 237.

17. *Ibid.*

Noce recognized that “the primacy of contemplation, the primacy of the immutable, and the reality of the eternal order are equivalent affirmations, which coincide with taking intellectual intuition as the definitive model of knowledge. The recognition of this form of knowledge is inseparable from the very possibility of metaphysical thought.”¹⁸ As such, these affirmations merely express the “essential metaphysical principles of the Catholic tradition: which says that everything that is participates necessarily in universal principles, which are the eternal and immutable essences contained in the permanent actuality of the divine intellect.”¹⁹ It is not clear how one can affirm creation in the Logos otherwise.

With the dissolution of those ontological conditions of possibility, reason itself becomes empirical, pragmatic, and functional. Historicism leads ineluctably to “sociologism,” which begins to overtake the Church as psychology, economics, and the social sciences displace theology and philosophy as primary modes of thought.²⁰ Sociologism effectively “reduces all conceptions of the world to ideologies, expressions of the historical-social situation of some groups, as spiritual superstructures or forces that are not spiritual at all, such as class interests, unconscious collective motivations, and concrete circumstances of social life.”²¹ This erodes the ontological basis

18. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 241.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 219. One can find an appreciative appraisal of this development in Massimo Faggioli’s interpretation of the importance of Marie-Dominique Chenu relative to the Second Vatican Council. “The distance between Chenu and the Augustinians is clear when we consider Chenu’s assumption that the distinction between sin and grace was ‘inadequate on Thomist grounds because it neglected the created autonomy and intelligibility of the world of nature, man, and history, and because it tended to compromise the methodological autonomy of the sciences that study it.’ Therefore understanding the *aggiornamento* of the Church that was achieved at Vatican II required understanding Christianity both in its dimension of ‘theology in act’ and in its development that only with the help of the social sciences could theology perceive the ‘signs of the times’” (Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* [New York: Paulist Press, 2012], 77, citing Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechism on Nature and Grace*, trans. Richard Arandez, FSC [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984], 235). For a critique of the positivism entailed in this notion of “methodological autonomy,” see Hanby, *No God, No Science?*, 9–48.

21. *Ibid.*, 219.

for any real distinction between power (*potestas*), understood as the capacity to effect, act, or compel, and authority (*autoritas*), which depends upon truth and compels principally by its own self-evidence.²² “The question of authority,” Del Noce writes, “is, in fact, the relationship between man and the invisible, the primacy of the invisible.”²³ Without these ontological conditions, authority can only be grounded on some form of positivism—legal, papal, or otherwise—where it is easily reducible to mere power detached from any intrinsic ordination to truth or goodness.²⁴ Inevitably, Catholics come to regard the Church herself in sociological and political terms, preoccupying themselves with its role as a part in the larger social whole or the distribution of power within. If the failure of “veterism” is its faux impermeability to historical change and its inability to penetrate or engage history from the inside, the danger of historicism is that in submitting metaphysics and theology to the judgment of history, it inevitably conflates the “signs of the times” with the voice of God (*vox temporis vox Dei*). The Holy Spirit, constantly invoked, is transformed imperceptibly “into the momentary spirit of the age, and what is done under the appearance of obedience to the pneuma” is in reality

22. As Hannah Arendt puts it, “Since authority demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion: where force is used, authority itself has failed! . . . If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments” (“What Is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* [New York: Viking Press, 1961], 91–92).

23. Del Noce, “Authority vs. Power,” in *The Crisis of Modernity*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 195.

24. Del Noce writes, “As a matter of fact, the confusion between authority and power arises whenever the idea of authority is not linked to the metaphysics of the primacy of being over becoming and, as a consequence, the superhuman foundation of authority is not taken into account. The philosophical consequences of the confusion between authority and power are immense. Indeed, only from the standpoint of their radical distinction can we speak of metaphysics as distinct from ideology. Conversely, if the idea of authority is absorbed into that of power, it follows that the general conceptions of reality are absorbed into ideology, understood as a practical act designed to legitimate, from the standpoint of being, some specific form of power, by calling being to fulfill this task” (Del Noce, “Authority vs. Power,” 194). For more on the distinction between power and authority see Arendt, “What Is Authority?” 91–142; Hanby, “For and Against Integralism.”

“submission to the dictates of fashion and apostasy from the Lord.”²⁵

These unsatisfactory alternatives form part of the intellectual milieu necessitating the Second Vatican Council, a milieu that deserves to be studied more deeply from the perspective of what Del Noce calls “ideal history.”²⁶ While the familiar division between the various schools of pre- and postconciliar Thomism and the council’s “neo-Augustinian” interpreters is not without some validity, it is also overdrawn and often pejorative, employed mostly by Catholic progressives promoting *aggiornamento* as the hermeneutical key to the council so as to portray their opponents as hostile to the world and betrayers of the council’s authentic meaning.²⁷ The empirical classification of theological positions is

25. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5: *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 117.

26. That is, from within the recognition of “philosophy become world,” which differs from, but does not exclude, the intentions of John XXIII in convening the council and the Council Fathers’ self-understanding of their deliberations. Even if one ignores the myriad cautions and concerns in the council documents and makes its “optimism” axiomatic or views the council principally as “the *incipit* of a *reformatio*, a more comprehensive updating of the Catholic Church in its theology and structures” (Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 52–53), the question remains as to *why* the Church’s theology and structures needed updating and what had transpired historically to render them obsolete. In other words, what is it that made (makes) “the Church in the modern world” such an urgent and vexed question? The very existence of the council presupposes that modernity represents some kind of dramatic change or break, and in fact the awareness of this pervades the council documents, e.g., in *Gaudium et spes* 4, which declares that “the human race is involved in a new stage of history . . . triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man.” These energies “recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people” (*ibid.*). This is because modernity, understood not just as what follows the Middle Ages and the Renaissance but as the first moderns understood it, is a total transformation of the world’s relation to God *quoad nos*, comprehending the whole of reality in its philosophical, natural, scientific, political, and religious dimensions. There is much in the council documents that shows that the Council Fathers understood this; but there is no reason to think, nor any requirement that we believe, that they understood this wholly or exhaustively.

27. See, e.g., Joseph A. Komonchak, “Augustine, Aquinas, or the Gospel *sine glossa*?” in Austen Ivereigh, ed., *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years after Vatican II: Essays for John Wilkins* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 102–18; Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 66–90.

at best a historical position, at worst an ideological one. In neither case can it move beyond the empirical contrast to a properly theological and philosophical adjudication of what is *true*, and so it cannot grasp the scope of the council's metaphysical achievement in avoiding either of these unhappy alternatives. Vatican II was not a philosophical *disputatio*, of course, and it did not provide a metaphysical synthesis; just as it did not pronounce on the replacement of Scholastic categories "by more relevant categories drawn from historicist, phenomenological, existentialist, and personalist trends."²⁸ But it did vindicate Blondel's desire to overcome the division by affirming both self-transcending essence and a dynamic historical existence, *both* an order of being that precedes and circumscribes us and a history that we make and by which we are made.²⁹ It did this by unifying them in Christ, who reveals and manifests both the eternal mystery of the Father and man's suprahistorical vocation. This would become the basis of the anthropological, christological, and ecclesial thinking implored by John Paul II and Benedict XVI.³⁰

28. Bernard Lonergan, "The Future of Thomism," in *Bernard Lonergan, A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1974), 44, 49, as cited in Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 82.

29. One can read Blondel's action theory and his criticism of Aristotelian cognition, at least as conceived by certain neo-Scholastics, as his attempt to accommodate what is true in the modern unification of knowing and making, and all that implies about the nature of history as a human artifact, within a metaphysics of participation and the apriority of creation, which continues to imply a priority of receptivity to action. This is not the place either to judge the success of that attempt or to try to resolve this profound question philosophically. For a profound treatment of this issue that exemplifies the "future thinking" implored by John Paul II in light of this conciliar achievement, see David L. Schindler, "The Meaning of the Human in a Technological Age: *Homo Faber, Homo Sapiens, Homo Adorans*," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 80–99.

30. See Alexander Dru's introduction to Blondel's *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, 13–124. William Portier maintains that Vatican II vindicates Blondel and reflects his profound influence over the shape of the question, especially his "most audacious" point in "Part V, Chapter 3 of *L'Action*, that the union of humanity and divinity in Christ is 'the measure of all things' (*panchristisme*) and perhaps the only solution to the 'Kantian aporia of the evanescence of sense data (*données sensibles*) faced with the intellect's dynamism toward the intelligible, and a definitive consistency of the sensible world as the basis of all human experience'" (William L. Portier, "Twentieth-Century Catholicism and the Triumph of Maurice Blondel," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38, no. 1 [Spring 2011]: 128).

Two of the council's teachings, which would prove central to both pontificates, deserve special mention in this regard. The first is the definition of the Church in *Lumen gentium*: the Church "in Christ is in the nature of sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among men."³¹ Joseph Ratzinger comments that, in the years following the council, the concept of *communio* was little used and little understood, "as it had not been discovered by progressive postconciliar theology. At that time, everything centered on the 'people of God,' a concept which was thought to be a particular innovation of the Second Vatican Council," and which was taken to denote a kind of "popular sovereignty."³² When the term *communio* first became fashionable, it was used interchangeably with "people of God" as an "essentially horizontal notion."³³ Hans Urs von Balthasar showed that *communio* entails a prior vertical and transcendent dimension.

In Christian terms, however, the communion established by God through Christ within humanity has two bases. One is God himself, who could not bestow personal communion with himself and among men if he were not already in a profound sense a community in himself: loving mutual inherence, loving exchange, which presupposes loving consent to another's freedom. Wherever the divinatory vista opening out on the divine Trinity, which alone discloses God concretely as absolute love, is blocked, the idea of perfect community can never fully develop. The second basis is in humanity itself. If man were not created in the image of God, and for him, he would not experience in himself the urge to look for a more perfect communion among human beings than he is capable of picturing within the setting of earthly conditions. For contact, dialogue, community of goods are only means, not the reality itself, which remains unimaginable, transcendent.³⁴

31. *Lumen gentium*, 1, 2.

32. Joseph Ratzinger, "Communio: A Program," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 441.

33. *Ibid.*, 442.

34. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Communio—A Program," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 157–58.

This explains why John Paul II and Benedict XVI insisted that *communio* qualify the ecclesiology of the *populus Dei*.³⁵ Indeed, the young Joseph Ratzinger had already laid the theological groundwork for this in his early commentary on the first chapter of *Gaudium et spes*, arguing that the interchangeability of *Ecclesia* and *populus Dei* risks reducing the latter to an empirical term.³⁶ It was a note he would echo throughout the rest of his career.

The ecclesiology of *communio* is rooted in the order and ontology of creation, which is rooted in turn in the eternal Logos of God. *Communio* in its ecclesiological dimension thus presupposes and entails the second aspect worthy of note in the council's teachings, where both the transcendent dimension of man's essence and his historical existence are affirmed. This is its anthropological center, which is inseparable from its christological core. *Gaudium et spes* proposed that it is "precisely by Christian faith in God," that "true humanism, i.e., man's full development as man, is attained."³⁷ The council thus roots the fulfillment of the human person in "the dynamism of a promise located above man" in a manner wholly consistent with the traditional philosophical definition of man as *corpore et anima unus*, stressed in the discussion of human dignity in article fourteen. Rather than stressing this "static" definition here, the council emphasizes the *sublimis vocatio* lived out historically. Commenting on *Gaudium et spes* 22, Joseph Ratzinger summarizes the epochal significance of this development.

We are probably justified in saying that here for the first time in an official document of the Magisterium, a new type of completely Christocentric theology appears. On the basis of Christ this dares to present theology as anthropology and only becomes radically theological by

35. Faggioli provides his typically tendentious reading of this development, suggesting that the 1985 Synod of Bishops and John Paul II somehow "revised" the true meaning of the council. "In the debates at the synod and in its final documents, it was clearly possible to see that some of the theological decisions made by Vatican II had been revised and reinterpreted by John Paul II. The notion of the Church as a 'people of God' lost the momentum it had gained twenty years before at the council" (Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 87).

36. Ratzinger, "The Dignity of the Human Person," 118. Here again we hear echos of Blondel.

37. *Ibid.*

including man in discourse about God by way of Christ, thus manifesting the deepest unity of theology.³⁸

The christological and anthropological center of Vatican II, which forms the backbone of its magisterial interpretation by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, simultaneously embraces the contingency and novelty of history and historical development and a transcendent order of being, nature, and truth. Again, there are manifold signs of this, from *Dignitatis humanae*'s insistence that religious freedom be in the service of truth to the very existence of the encyclicals *Fides et ratio* and *Veritatis splendor*.³⁹

Even so, the significance of this achievement has been obscured by the protracted contest over the meaning of the council. This is symptomatic of the deeper crisis, though it is important to understand this at the most fundamental level. The division given by Massimo Faggioli between "*Communio*'s idea of Vatican II as validating *ressourcement* as a method for further work in theology versus *Concilium*'s idea of Vatican II as the *incipit* of a *reformatio*, a more comprehensive updating of the Catholic Church in its theology and structures," though superficial and misleading, is not entirely false.⁴⁰ These contrasting positions, however, are secondary to the questions raised by Blondel and Del Noce about the latent metaphysics of progressive religious historians like Faggioli, who have now taken it upon themselves to adjudicate the meaning of the council. Blondel put the questions as follows:

What attitude will the pure historian be led to take up in the face of Christian facts? Everything depends upon that. Can he legitimately ignore apologetic and dogmatic problems? And if he cannot, what method will he adopt in regard to these problems and what solutions? Thus we find

38. *Ibid.*, 159.

39. *Dignitatis humanae*, 2.

40. Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 52–53. Here, as in so many places, Del Noce seems to have pre-comprehended Faggioli more fully than he has comprehended himself. "Being cut off from philosophical and theological tradition, progressivism must confess its encounter with *Modernism*. Its work is not directed at continuing the tradition (or at least the two major theological and philosophical traditions, Augustinianism and Thomism) but only at seeking an adaptation to the modern world" (Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 250, emphasis original).

ourselves back again at our initial difficulty without having advanced a single step: the Christian facts do not, by common consent, suffice for Christian beliefs; how then can one pass from the former to the latter? Some historians have claimed to practice free scientific enquiry and historical apologetics simultaneously and indivisibly; what then does their apologetic add to their history so as to augment the obscure meaning of the fact and to extract faith in the invisible supernatural from invisible events? . . . Will the tissue of critical history be strong enough to bear the infinite weight of the ancient faith and the whole richness of catholic dogma?⁴¹

Del Noce's answer to this question is that it cannot. It is one thing to think theologically and philosophically from within the broad tradition of Christian Platonism and quite another to think *about* philosophy and theology from an illusory position external to it, such as the vantage occupied by modern historians. The transition from the former to the latter involves a "break with the entire tradition of the philosophers of 'participation,'" and it necessarily "*transcribes the truths of Christianity within the categories that depend on the instrumentalist conception of the homo faber*"—the "usurpation" to which Blondel had referred.⁴²

Faggioli writes approvingly of the hermeneutical principle of his Bologna School, font of the historiographical turn in Vatican II studies, the principle of regarding the council as an "event."⁴³ He writes further of a "fracture between the magisterium and a theology that had left metaphysics as its center of orientation and increasingly become a theology of 'salvation history' where human history becomes a real source of theological work."⁴⁴ It would have been more accurate to say that history becomes not the source of theological work but the *criterion* by which theological truth claims will be judged. The elevation of the "event" to a hermeneutical principle prior to and outside theology means that theological truth claims will always be determined and judged in advance by the more fundamental structure of the "event." Moreover, the vantage

41. Blondel, "History and Dogma," 233.

42. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 231 (emphasis original).

43. Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 15.

44. *Ibid.*, 133.

point of the historian outside the metaphysics of participation affords no way of even thinking of theological truth claims *as true*. Truth as an ontological category or a transcendental attribute of being follows God into eclipse. It is unsurprising then that God, truth, and even mysticism are mostly absent from Faggioli's thought. This is not a failure of piety or belief; there is no reason to mistrust his sincerity. It is rather that these notions are extrinsic to historicist and functionalist thinking, which can only compare and juxtapose empirical "facts" to other empirical facts.⁴⁵ The difficulty identified by Blondel, that of passing from "the fact" to the faith—the *fides quae creditur*—inevitably involves the mediation of metaphysics, whether or not this is acknowledged. Historicism ignores this inevitability while simultaneously reducing truth to the functionalist terms of empiricism and sociology, where it generally appears as "novelty, authenticity, originality, effectiveness," or as a function for legitimating power structures. Both reflect the ontological primacy of power and the absolutization of politics. Faggioli exemplifies this perfectly when he subtly transforms "doctrine" into "doctrinal policy," at least when it concerns the teaching of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. He thereby transforms magisterial truth claims into political positions—that is, into expressions of the will to power—within the game of ecclesiastical politics.⁴⁶ The distinction between authority and power is thus

45. As Del Noce puts it, "According to a neo-Modernist, *there is science and there is religion, but there cannot be metaphysics*. However, we must acknowledge that progressivism cannot think otherwise, because of its very starting point" (Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 252, emphasis original).

46. See Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 11, 15. Notice how he characterizes John Paul II's and Benedict XVI's interpretations of the council: "Ratzinger agreed with much of de Lubac's views about the postconciliar situation, but as a cardinal prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005 and as pope after his election in April 2005, Ratzinger had many more opportunities to enforce his judgment" (ibid., 72). "The 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops marked an important milestone because it represented the first major attempt of John Paul II's pontificate to steer the reception of Vatican II in a direction that he desired" (ibid., 86). These words were published in 2012. His tone, especially when he speaks of Benedict, becomes much harsher once Benedict leaves the papacy. See also Faggioli, "Traditionalism, American Style: A New Kind of Opposition to Rome," *Commonweal*, November 23, 2021, available at https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/traditionalism-american-style?utm_content=buffer3cce0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

collapsed, absolving Faggioli from regarding as authoritative the teachings of popes who are no longer in power.

Faggioli is both a vigorous defender of the progressive interpretation of Vatican II and a relentless champion of the new synodal process initiated by Pope Francis. We have seen that Del Noce seems to pre-comprehend Faggioli more clearly than he comprehends himself. Del Noce has understood the sense in which progressive Catholicism is essentially political in character. It is not simply that it favors the politics of the left over the right, though this is obviously true, but that its defining thought forms operate as if power relations were the fundamental reality, indeed the only reality. The crises of truth and authority follow automatically from this assumption.⁴⁷ That it shares this metaphysical foundation with the

47. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy, SND (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 15–17. Ratzinger’s remark below on the crisis in the Church and the reception of *Lumen gentium* could be applied whole cloth to Faggioli’s historical and sociologizing approach, which ecclesiologically “locks out” the crisis concerning God in the way described above.

This story came to mind when I read the text of the farewell lecture given by Johann Baptist Metz on his retirement from his professorial chair in Münster in 1993. Metz says: “The crisis that has come upon European Christianity is no longer primarily—still less entirely a crisis of the Church. . . . This crisis runs deeper: it by no means derives from the state in which the Churches find themselves: the crisis has become a crisis concerning God.” “The slogan is, ‘Religion: yes; God: no’—and again, the ‘no’ here is not meant to be categorical, as it was in the great atheistic systems. There is no longer any great atheistic system. For the atheism of today can once more take the word ‘God’ on its lips, but in a spirit of distraction or resignation, without really meaning to talk about him.” “The Church has likewise her own notion of immunization against crises concerning God. She no longer talks today—as she still did for instance at the First Vatican Council—about God, but only, as for instance at the last Council—about the God who is preached by the Church. The crisis concerning God is ecclesiologically locked out.” Words like this, in the mouth of the man who created “political theology,” have to make us sit up and listen.

Ratzinger, by contrast, insists, “The Second Vatican Council certainly did intend to subordinate what it said about the Church to what it said about God and to set it in that context; it intended to propound an ecclesiology that was theo-logical in the proper sense” (“The Ecclesiology of the Constitution

world of secular atheism raises severe questions as to whether progressive Catholicism suffices either as an interpretation of the council or as an adequate reading of the signs of the times. “The words freedom, democracy, and justice are untouchable, and rights are constantly declared, but this does not alter the fact that actual reality is marching towards a synthesis of all the forms of despotism that have ever appeared in history.”⁴⁸ Del Noce’s prescient words could well have been a description of the political sensibilities undergirding Faggioli’s role as a self-appointed champion of synodality. “It would be naïve to separate the current Catholic conversation on ecclesial synodality from the sensibility of homo democraticus—men and women steeped in the culture of human rights, communicative dissent, and, most of all, egalitarianism.”⁴⁹ “In fact, it is democracy better than any other system that corresponds to what Vatican II calls ‘the inherent dignity of the human person.’”⁵⁰ There are a lot of unanswered questions about synodality, and in one sense the answers may not matter much. Faggioli’s relentless media campaign, an almost daily barrage of tweets and articles designed to craft the narrative around synodality and to shape its reception, is sure to have its effect, irrespective of what official meaning synodality may eventually acquire.⁵¹ Whatever synodality turns out to mean, the fact

Lumen Gentium,” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005], 124–25).

48. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 241.

49. Massimo Faggioli, “Whose Synodality? Social Alliances and Institutional Models in Global Catholicism,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 17, 2021, available at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/whose-synodality-social-alliances-and-institutional-models-global-catholicism>.

50. Massimo Faggioli, “The Emergence of Synodality and the Inadequacy of Canon Law,” *Pearls and Irritations*, October 4, 2019, available at <https://johnmenadue.com/massimo-faggioli-the-emergence-of-synodality-and-the-inadequacy-of-canon-law-historically-the-church-has-never-been-regulated-exclusively-by-legal-codes-says-massimo-faggioli/>.

51. A passage from what one might call Faggioli’s “pre-Twitter” phase provides a clue to this effort: “Fifty years after the event of Vatican II, we find ourselves in that crucial moment of passage between the short run and the long run: the clash of narratives about Vatican II encounters here the perennial law of the reception of the councils of the Church. Giuseppe Alberigo, recalling

that it lends itself to sociology, which can only distort the essential nature of the Church and darken the eclipse of God, compels us to examine this idea more closely in light of the internal schism of modern Catholicism.

DOWN THE SYNODAL PATH

In his 2015 address commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis declared synodality to be a “constitutive element of the Church” and announced a perpetual process of “listening,” of “journeying together . . . along the paths of history,” culminating in the Synod of Bishops.⁵² This was followed by the 2018 apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio*. This “listening process,” now in its first phase in anticipation of the 2023 convocation of the “Synod on Synodality,” is to be conducted at every level of the Church. The process is to begin with the “particular churches” and their “organs of communion”: “the presbyteral council, the college of consultors, chapters of canons and the pastoral council,” all of which must stay connected to the “base.”⁵³ The second level includes “Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions, Particular Councils and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops,”⁵⁴ which have been elevated in importance under Francis’s pontificate. The last level is the “universal Church,” where “the Synod of Bishops, representing the Catholic episcopate, becomes

the worrisome memorandum between 1600 and 1612 by Robert Bellarmine to Pope Clement VIII on the progress of the reforms decided by the Council of Trent (between 1545 and 1563), estimated that it took at least fifty years for the beginning of the reception of Trent.” Today, close to sixty years after Vatican II and in the aftermath of the magisterial interpretation of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, it is obvious from his prodigious daily output that Faggioli is doing all he can, by means of new instantaneous media platforms, to seize this “crucial moment” and relaunch the beginning of the reception of Vatican II. See Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 139–40.

52. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (Vatican City, 17 October 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal church.”⁵⁵

There is certainly nothing objectionable about the pope seeking consultation from the bishops or with the Church drawing on the experience of the lay faithful and the wisdom acquired from “the unique character of their vocation . . . to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God.”⁵⁶ It is also true, at least in the United States, that there is a desperate need to revitalize the moribund life of the parish, reduced in many instances to little more than a sacrament dispensary. The elevation of synodality to a “constitutive” element of the Church, however, seems to suggest something more—precisely *what* is not exactly clear—and this has been seized upon by Faggioli and other progressive champions of synodality. As they have done since the election of Pope Francis, Faggioli and his collaborators interpret responses to this initiative not along the axis of true and false but of friend and foe, portraying those who question or hesitate as opponents of Pope Francis and his attempt to “implement” Vatican II, conceived principally as a matter of politics and Church governance.⁵⁷ The implication that the council has not been implemented already suggests that they see in synodality an opportunity to right a wrong, to realize the long-delayed implementation of what they regard as the true ecclesiology of the council.⁵⁸ Whether this is in fact true is fundamentally a theological and indeed doctrinal question, not merely a historical one. We have seen, however, that ecclesiology is never just ecclesiology. It carries an entire cosmology and theology—or atheology—in tow. Sociologism is functionally atheistic not because its adherents are impious or

55. Ibid. (emphasis original).

56. *Christifideles laici*, 9.

57. See Faggioli, “Synodality and Papal Primacy: Questions Regarding the Catholic Church Today and the Next Pope,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 3, 2021, available at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/synodality-and-papal-primacy-questions-regarding-catholic-church-today-and-next-pope>; “Whose Synodality?”; “Synodality? What’s Synodality?” *Commonweal*, June 15, 2021, available at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/synodality-whats-synodality>; “The Emergence of Synodality and the Inadequacy of Canon Law.”

58. As suggested above, this is the not-too-subtle subtext of his *Vatican II*.

unbelieving but because God's being and the meaning of our creaturehood inform neither its basic conception of the world nor its fundamental mode and pattern of thinking.⁵⁹ Its immanence is no less extrinsicist than traditionalism with its grace/nature dualism. Its functionalist mode of reasoning effectively negates any sense of a transcendent order of being, nature, or truth, leaving only social functions and various historical, social, psychological, or economic conditions—in other words, relations of power. Faggioli's definition of the synodal Church fits this description exactly.⁶⁰

59. Del Noce's words about Marx could be said of Marxism's decomposition into sociologism, through which, he says, "Marxism reaches a much deeper form of irreligion than atheistic negation" (*The Age of Secularization*, 242). "Atheism pervades all the workings of his system in the way the scripture's *Ego eimi qui sum* permeates every articulation of the Thomist *Summa*" (ibid., 246).

60. This is also how he characterizes the clarification over the status of national bishops' conferences in John Paul II's apostolic constitution *Apostolos suos* (1988). What presents itself first as a clarification of the *theological nature* of these conferences, Faggioli reduces to a matter of power. "It seemed that power was being reclaimed by the Church's head in Rome at the expense of the Church's body throughout the world" (Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 1.5). Faggioli's point is a faint echo of Walter Kasper's position in his debate with Ratzinger following the 1985 Synod of Bishops. Ratzinger's response, which, combined with Kasper's clarification, seemingly led to something of a rapprochement between their positions, is thus a preemptive refutation of Faggioli, indeed one of many.

The resistance to the expression of the priority of the universal Church before the individual parts of the Church is difficult to understand in theological terms, perhaps indeed incomprehensible. It becomes comprehensible only out of a suspicion that is thus briefly formulated [by Kasper]: "This formula becomes truly problematical if this one universal Church is covertly identified with the Roman Church, and, de facto, with the pope and the curia. If that is happening, then the text issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cannot be understood as an aid to clarifying communion-ecclesiology; rather it has to be understood as dismissing it and attempting to restore Roman centralism." In this passage, the identification of the universal Church with the pope and curia is at first introduced just as a hypothesis, as a danger, yet afterward it nonetheless seems to be attributed to the letter of the Congregation for Doctrine, which thus necessarily appears as an attempt at theological restoration and therefore a defection from the Second Vatican Council. The interpretive leap is astonishing, but there is no doubt it stands for a suspicion that is widespread; it gives expression to a complaint to be heard

Synodal Church means ecclesial processes that are less centered on the clergy and more open to the leadership role of the laity, especially women. But the big question is who and what are the driving forces of synodality. And the answer is complex. What are the social alliances at the center of ecclesial synodality in the 21st century? What classes or class fragments are allied with the Church turning to synodality? What sections of the Church or specific actors are at the center of the synodal movement? What organizations and networks?⁶¹

all around, and it probably also expresses a growing inability to imagine anything concrete under the heading of the universal Church or that of the one, holy, catholic Church. The only elements still in the picture are the pope and curia, and if these are rated too highly from a theological point of view, then people are bound to feel threatened. (Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*," 134–35)

The situation is not substantially altered by the addition of "the people" as a counterbalance to the "pope-curia" pair, as Faggioli so often seems to do. It represents a fundamentally clericalist vision of the Church—the Church as an apparatus for the administration of power—in anticlerical guise, and it amounts in each instance to a failure to apprehend the Church in its ontological dimension as fundamentally sacramental and Marian. As Ratzinger puts it,

The Council's Constitution on the Church concludes with a chapter on the Mother of God. The question of whether a separate document should be devoted to her was debated at length, as is well known. I think it was a fitting arrangement that the Marian doctrine entered immediately into the teaching on the Church. For in this way the point from which we started finally becomes evident once again: Church is not a contrivance or an apparatus, not merely an institution or one of the usual sociological entities—she is a person. She is a woman; she is a mother. She is alive. The Marian understanding of the Church is the most categorical antithesis to a merely organizational or bureaucratic concept of the Church. We cannot make Church; we must be Church. And we *are* Church, and Church is in us only insofar as faith shapes our being, above and beyond anything we do. Only in Marian being do we become Church. At the origins, too, Church was not made but born. She was born when the fiat was awakened in Mary's soul. That is the most profound desire of the Council: that the Church might awaken in our souls. Mary shows us the way." ("The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council," in *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, trans. Michael J. Miller et al. [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011], 28)

61. Faggioli, "Whose Synodality?"

If these are questions to which a “synodal” Church is the answer, then it is evident that authority has already been reduced to power and that the sacramental Church has already been replaced with a sociologicistic and bureaucratic one. This suggests that the still more fundamental question for synodal ecclesiology is not primarily how to distribute ecclesial power but whether the Church will forget herself and acquiesce in the triumph of power over the authority of the truth, for the service of which ecclesial power exists at all.

The answer is not clear, as there is much that remains undefined. “Synodality,” its champions concede, appears nowhere in the council documents. Faggioli himself says that “the 82-year-old pope’s conception of ecclesial synodality no doubt has its limits and ambivalences,” an indication, perhaps, that either the concept remains underdeveloped or the pope’s intentions may not be identical to those of its most vigorous proponents.⁶² The theoretical plasticity of the concept is attested by Faggioli’s own observation that different “social alliances” and “institutional models” within “global Catholicism” could dramatically affect how its promise “to give voice to the entire People of God” is realized at the practical level.⁶³ This seems to be partly a matter of design; an open-ended “listening process” seems almost to defy theoretical clarity by definition.

Pope Francis premises his exhortation to synodality on the teaching of *Lumen gentium* 12.

“The whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 *Jn* 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, when ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful’ it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals.” These are the famous words *infallible “in credendo.”*⁶⁴

62. Faggioli, “The Emergence of Synodality and the Inadequacy of Canon Law.”

63. Faggioli, “Whose Synodality?” See also *Episcopalis communio*, 6.

64. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, citing *Evangelii gaudium*, 120. The text referred to in *Lumen gentium* 12 reads, “Universitas fidelium, qui unctionem habent a Sancto (cf. 1 *Io* 2,20 et 27), in credendo falli nequit,

This means, as he had said in *Evangelii gaudium* 120, that

“all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.” The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.⁶⁵

The pope rightly stresses the common dignity, mission, and participation of all the baptized in Christ’s prophetic, priestly, and kingly office, according to the modes proper to their states of life. Nevertheless, these formulations raise as many questions as they answer, especially the meaning of *populus Dei* and its famous words “*infallible ‘in credendo.’*”⁶⁶ The pope does not really explicate either concept, yet the immediate context of *Lumen gentium* 12 makes it clear that the *populus Dei* is not an empirical or sociological concept but a theological one and that the “infallible” faith of the people and their “universal consent” therefore does not refer to a kind of public opinion but to the faith itself, “*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*”⁶⁷ For, as Joseph Ratzinger made clear, it is the primary definition of the Church as sacrament, originating from the communion that is the Trinity and the anterior order that flows from creation in the Logos, that determines the meaning and indeed the being of the *populus Dei*.⁶⁸

atque hanc suam peculiarem proprietatem mediante supernaturali sensu fidei totius populi manifestat, cum ‘ab Episcopis usque ad extremos laicos fideles’ universalem suum consensum de rebus fidei et morum exhibet.”

65. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, citing *Evangelii gaudium*, 120.

66. The actual words of *Lumen gentium* 12 are “*in credendo falli nequit,*” which carry a somewhat different connotation than the dogmatic meaning of *infallible*.

67. ITC, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” 52. Cf. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 2.5 (CCSL 64, 25–26, p. 149).

68. After tracing the preconconciliar history of the *populus Dei*, Ratzinger writes the following: “Now what does it mean concretely? It means that we cannot simply say that Christians *are* the People of God. From the empirical

The text of *Lumen gentium* 12 continues,

That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority [Magisterium], in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God.(cf. 1 Thes 2:13) Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints (cf. Jude 3).

The reference to “the faith given once and for all to the saints” not only corroborates the theological meaning of *populus Dei*; it further implies that the “infallibility” or indefectibility of the people of God refers not merely to the synchronic composition of Faggioli’s “global Catholicism”—itself a sociological and not a theological term—but to the diachronic, and indeed transcendent, composition of the *communio sanctorum*. As *Communio nis notio* would later explain,

In its invisible elements, this communion exists not only among the members of the pilgrim Church on earth, but also between these and all who, having passed from this world in the grace of the Lord, belong to the heavenly Church or will be incorporated into it after having been fully purified. This means, among other things, that there is a *mutual relationship* between the pilgrim Church on earth and the heavenly Church in the historical-redemptive

perspective, they are a non-people, as any sociological analysis can quickly demonstrate. And God is nobody’s property; no one can claim him for himself. The non-people of the Christians can be God’s people only through incorporation into Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Abraham. Even if we speak about the People of God, Christology must remain the center of the teaching about the Church, and, consequently, the Church must be thought of essentially in terms of the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and holy orders. We are People of God by virtue of the crucified and risen Body of Christ and in no other way. We become it only in living association with him, and only in this context does the expression have any meaning. The Council made this connection beautifully clear by highlighting another fundamental word for the Church along with the expression ‘People of God’: the Church as sacrament. One remains faithful to the Council only if one always reads these two central terms for its ecclesiology—sacrament and People of God—together and always thinks of them together. Here it becomes apparent how far ahead of us the Council still is: the idea of the Church as sacrament has scarcely entered into our consciousness” (“The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council,” 27).

mission. Hence the ecclesiological importance not only of Christ's intercession on behalf of his members, but also of that of the saints and, in an eminent fashion, of the Blessed Virgin Mary's.⁶⁹

Let us consider, then, how the vision of the synodal process as presented by its proponents measures up to the *communio* ecclesiology and ontology of *Lumen gentium*.

A POLITICAL PROCESS IN SEARCH OF A THEOLOGY?

An odd fact about the synodal path that the Church is now embarked upon is that the launching of the "regular synodal process" preceded the development of its theological rationale, a fact that is all the more remarkable given what "a momentous and new teaching"⁷⁰ it is reported to be. In 2018, the International Theological Commission (= ITC) undertook a study attempting "to respond to the need to go deeper into the theological meaning of synodality along the lines of Catholic ecclesiology."⁷¹ The study is occasionally illuminating, but the task of providing a *post hoc* justification for a process already commenced compromises the theological analysis and raises questions about its adequacy either as an expression of the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium* or as a discernment of the "signs of the times."

The burden of the study is to explicate how "synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the people of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission."⁷² It is a task that simultaneously points back in time to the origins of the Church and forward to the teaching of *Lumen gentium*. The study concedes that the distinction between synod and council,

69. *Communio* notio, 6.

70. International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (2 March 2018), 2, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html.

71. *Ibid.*, 10.

72. *Ibid.*, 6.

terms that were still synonymous at Vatican II, is a new one, and that the term “synodality” is a “linguistic novelty,” distinct from uses of the noun “synod” and the adjective “synodal.” Communion, “which expresses the profound substance of the mystery of the Church,”⁷³ is closely related to the concept of synodality, but they are not synonymous. A crucial question, and perhaps the key to the ecclesiological vision operating throughout the study, is precisely what “synodality” adds to the concept of communion.

Despite these innovations, the document takes pains to show, both etymologically and historically, that the new concept of synodality belongs to the very origins and essence of the Church and the heart of conciliar ecclesiology. “Composed of a preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path), it indicates the path along which the People of God walk together.”⁷⁴ The study seeks to ground the Church’s “synodal vocation” in the calling of Israel in the Old Testament, before initiating a sweeping historical survey of the role of synods in the history of the Church. The Council of Jerusalem receives special attention because there we see for the first time in the New Testament “a synodal event coming into being,” and because the witness of Acts 15 that the main question was put “to the whole Church” provides an archetype for the “active part” everyone is meant to play in the synodal way.⁷⁵ The exegesis is strained, however; the biblical text cannot really support the platitude that “everyone plays an active part, though with varied roles and contributions,” or, rather, the paucity of the biblical witness to the proceedings leaves the assertion devoid of any real meaning and content. As such sweeping surveys go, however, the analysis is largely unobjectionable otherwise.

Questions emerge, however, when the synodal process is presented as the realization of the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., 3.

75. Ibid., 20. The language of “event” will later prove important. Note that the notion of the Second Vatican Council as an “event” is one of the core hermeneutical principles of the historiographical approach to the council undertaken by Giuseppe Alberigo and the John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies in Bologna, from which Faggioli derives his methodological approach. See Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 15–16, 136–37.

The study states,

The ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptised, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations, and their ministries. In this context the concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church, whose source and summit is the Eucharistic synaxis.⁷⁶

A subtle transposition has taken place here. *Lumen gentium* begins with the mystery of communion and the Church “in the nature of sacrament—a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men” because the Church derives its unity from the unity of God. “Hence the universal Church is seen to be a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁷ This was the basis of the controversial teaching of *Communio in notio* that “the Church as a whole, in her essential mystery, was a reality that ontologically and temporally preceded the individual particular Churches.”⁷⁸ Sociologism and historicism, which do not deal in truth but only in “facts,” cannot apprehend, much less adjudicate, that this is an *ontological* point; they can only compare and contrast it with competing positions or analyze its function within some kind of abstract system. They can only treat it, in other words, as an ideology, to be judged on some extra-theological—historical or political—criteria. Yet, properly understood, this corroborates the point cited earlier from Ratzinger.⁷⁹ The Church is only the people of God because she is first a sacrament, and she is only a sacrament because God in Christ has chosen to share the intratrinitarian *communio* with us, drawing us into that “universal communion that binds together heaven and earth, the living and the dead; past, present, and future; and opens up toward

76. ITC, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” 6.

77. *Lumen gentium*, 4. Cf. Cyprian of Carthage, *De Orat. Dom.* 23 (PL 4, 553); Augustine, *Sermon* 71, 20, 33 (PL 38, 463); John Damascene, *Adv. Iconocl.* 12 (PG 86, 1358D).

78. Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” 134. See *Communio in notio*, 9.

79. See note 36 above.

eternity.”⁸⁰ Communion precedes the people of God—ontologically and causally—“because the one and only Church precedes creation” and is “the inner goal of creation.”⁸¹ “The Church is *kat’holon* from the very first moment—comprehending the whole universe.”⁸² This means, once again, that the *populus Dei* is not merely an empirical or sociological concept but a theological concept encompassing the whole *communio sanctorum* within and beyond history. This is why the Church can also be called “that Jerusalem which is above” and “our mother,” and why it is said to “transcend at once all times and racial bounds” even as it “enters into human history.”⁸³ We may say, in short, that *communio* ecclesiology, which grounds the *populus Dei* in its theological and ontological basis, enjoys a certain theological, ontological, causal priority over the *populus Dei*, a theological truth borne out subsequently in the Magisterium of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.⁸⁴

The ITC study inverts this order of presentation, however, making “the ecclesiology of the People of God” the “context” in which the “concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church.”⁸⁵ The study does note that the order of *Lumen gentium* “expresses an important step forward in the way the Church understands herself.”⁸⁶ At this important juncture, however, the study is silent on the transcendent and vertical dimensions of the Church’s nature, instead using the sequence of *Lumen gentium* to emphasize that “the ecclesiastical hierarchy is at the service of the People of God.”⁸⁷ The study does state that “in the gift and commitment of communion can be found the source, the form, and the scope

80. Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” 143.

81. *Ibid.*, 134.

82. *Ibid.*, 136.

83. *Lumen gentium*, 6.

84. Needless to say, merely to contrast this teaching with alternative ecclesiological visions is not to adjudicate it or contest its truth but to reduce theology once more to ideology.

85. ITC, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” 6.

86. *Ibid.*, 56.

87. *Ibid.*, 54.

of synodality, inasmuch as it expresses the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the People of God in the responsible and ordered participation of all its members in discerning and putting into practice ways of fulfilling its mission.”⁸⁸ However, the study’s interest lies not in explicating the communion that is the “source” of synodality, but in the “ordered participation of all its members.”⁸⁹ When combined with the inverted order of *Lumen gentium* and the new teaching that synodality is “an essential dimension of the Church,” this focus makes it seem as though communion were a function of the Church’s “synodal” activity: the “style,” “structures and ecclesial processes,” and “synodal events” by which the Church undertakes the process of “consulting everyone.”⁹⁰ This impression is reinforced when we read that “exercising synodality *makes real* the human person’s call to live communion, which comes about through sincere self-giving, union with God and unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.”⁹¹

The ITC study passes almost imperceptibly from a theological justification for the synodal process to a religious sociology concerned with the dynamics of synodal structures, ecclesial processes, and events. One could easily be misled by this sociological perspective into thinking that the “episcopal and synodal principle” formulated by St. Cyprian—that nothing in the Church should be done without the bishop (*nihil sine episcopo*), the council (*nihil sine consilio vestro*), or the consensus of the people (*et sine consensus plebis*)—referred to the as yet nonexistent procedures for “consulting everyone” *rather than* to fidelity to “the faith given once and for all to the saints.” This sociological outlook makes it seem at times as if the *sensus fidelium* were a kind of “public opinion,” ascertainable by modern polling methods, rather than the “faith professed by the Church everywhere, always and by everyone (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*).”⁹² The study acknowledges that synods and councils have been episcopal assemblies, convoked episodically throughout the

88. *Ibid.*, 43.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*, 70, 68.

91. *Ibid.*, 43 (emphasis added).

92. *Ibid.*, 52.

history of the Church, typically to deal with doctrinal crises. This is difficult to square with the Church's synodal constitution and the more egalitarian impulse promoted in the new Synodal Way. The feeble appeal to historical conditions to explain away the Council of Trent's failure to live up to the new ideal is embarrassing: "In keeping with the culture of the time, the diocesan and provincial Synods celebrated following the Council of Trent were not meant to involve the active participation of the whole People of God—the *congregatio fidelium*—but to pass on and enact the Council's norms and dispositions."⁹³

The questions raised by this anachronism are more embarrassing still. The study holds that "synodality is the *specific modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church"; "exercising synodality makes real the human person's call to live communion"; and synodality is exercised in a particular listening "style," undertaken in "structures and ecclesial processes in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at the institutional level," and in a program of "*synodal events* in which the Church is called together by the competent authority in accordance with specific procedures laid down by ecclesiastical discipline."⁹⁴ What are we to make, then, of the vast period of the Church's history when such style, processes, and events were lacking? Does the study really mean to suggest that the Church's communion was *unreal* prior to the advent of "the parish pastoral council and the financial council" or the invention of the questionnaire and the discussion group facilitator?⁹⁵ It would seem that either our forebears in the faith were "making synodality happen"⁹⁶ without knowing it, in which case communion does not depend upon the style, processes, and events that are now being implemented, or we would

93. *Ibid.*, 35.

94. *Ibid.*, 70.

95. *Ibid.*, 84. "In the parish there are two structures which have a synodal character: the parish pastoral council and the financial council, with lay participation in consultation and planning. In this sense it seems necessary to review the canonical norm which at present only suggests that there should be a pastoral council and make it obligatory, as the last Synod of the Diocese of Rome did. Bringing about an effective synodal dynamic in a local Church also requires that the Diocesan Pastoral Council and parish pastoral councils should work in a co-ordinated way and be appropriately upgraded" (*ibid.*).

96. *Ibid.*, 9.

have to conclude, even more absurdly, that Catholicism is finally being realized for the first time in *us* and that the long-awaited implementation of the “ecclesiology of the People of God” marks year zero in the founding of the Church.

Earlier generations of Christians lived the reality of communion and the Church’s evangelizing mission by living together the Christian year of feasts and fasts, by participating in the sacramental life of the Church, by raising their children in the faith, by performing spiritual and corporeal works of mercy, and by fulfilling “the unique character of their vocation . . . to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God.”⁹⁷ The Christian life and the Church’s evangelizing mission are not administrative programs but a culture and way of life. Now, it seems, in dioceses where Virtus training undermines natural community and parents must submit to fingerprinting in order to lead a boy scout troop in the parish basement, the faithful are going to use questionnaires and facilitate discussion groups to “pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions, which correspond as closely as possible to the will of God.”⁹⁸ The study does not define what it means by “pastoral decisions.” It does not explain how these “pastoral decisions” relate to doctrinal and philosophical questions; indeed, it says a great deal about listening to the Holy Spirit and little about truth. Nor does it say which “pastoral decisions” are so vexing and so urgent that they necessitate what amounts to a massive data collection operation. Faggioli points out that “something like the Central Committee of German Catholics, which—together with the bishops’ conference—is at the center of the ‘Synodal Path’ exists only in Germany.”⁹⁹ Should we

97. *Christifideles laici*, 9.

98. ITC, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” 68. The phrase “as closely as possible to the will of God” is an ambiguous one and begs for clarification given the context of communal discernment and in light of the confusion generated by *Amoris laetitia*, §§302 and 305, so that “the law of gradualness” is not conflated with the “gradualness of the law.” Cf. *Familiaris consortio*, 34.

99. Faggioli, “Whose Synodality?” Elsewhere he writes, “Synodality is crucial to making space for the paradoxical in Catholicism, for a Catholic way to include and sanctify the messiness of the Christian experience. Our Church

look to events in Germany to provide answers to these questions?

There is a considerable danger that the implementation of “synodality” will become the occasion for replacing what remains of the Church’s sacramental, organismic, and Marian self-understanding with a bureaucratic and political understanding. This would mean that the Church had completely blocked God out of its field of vision and exiled him from its thought forms—though this would not prevent its calling upon the Holy Spirit, like an object ready to hand, to sanctify its actions. Contrived exercises in artificial “dialogue” cannot replace the living Christian community we have done our utmost to destroy. They certainly cannot sustain a truly mystical Christianity; they are its very antithesis. This would be the most tragic of ironies: promoting, in the name of anticlericalism, the most clericalist conception of the Church imaginable—the Church of pure administration, though with its functions now distributed more “democratically” among various parties and agencies.¹⁰⁰ Faggioli seems to be partially aware of this, noting

is in cultural and political crisis, but there is also a crisis of the legitimacy of ecclesiastical structures, so that our encounter with the sacred in communal spaces is itself endangered. That encounter must be *experienced*; otherwise, people leave, especially if they already sense that the hierarchy is governing access to the sacred through procedural means aimed at exclusion. This is the framework in which we should think about matters like the blessing of gay couples in Germany or Joe Biden’s access to the Eucharist. It reveals the dangers of the non-Catholic understanding of the Church being advanced at the highest levels of the hierarchy” (“Synodality? What’s Synodality?”).

100. For the most profound diagnosis of this form of clericalism that I have encountered, see Antonio López, “Friends of the Bridegroom: Reflections on Priestly Fatherhood in Light of Contemporary Challenges,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 250–92. López writes critically of a conception of power that “would be nothing but a neutral capacity to order people and things, and its goodness would depend on the integrity of its wielder and the nobility of his purpose. This, of course, presupposes that power is the exercise of a human freedom that is not intrinsically attracted to the good, and that this power designs man’s countenance and forges his destiny by enacting available possibilities” (254). “Within such a subjective anthropology,” he continues, “both vocation and power begin and end with oneself and concern mostly what one can do. Were we to grant this account, we would understand the priest as someone who felt called to and relatively gifted for the tasks to which holy orders gave him access after he passed muster with those in charge of his priestly formation. The nature of his actions and his gender would have little to do with the calling and authority with which ordi-

that the synodal process “may look like a bureaucratic undertaking.” Yet his feeble response that “synodality is about sacramentality and the Church as a sacrament” and that “synods and councils have always had a liturgical core” is exactly what one would expect from an “engaged religious sociologist.”¹⁰¹ The sacraments are a secondary addendum tacked onto a form of thinking and a series of preoccupations that are functionally atheistic: “recovering the legitimacy of ecclesial spaces”; “exposing the neo-traditionalist and neo-integralist understanding of tradition”¹⁰²; discovering in recent Church history “interesting examples of how to change the systems of ecclesial governance”; and “finding ways to overcome the limits of a legal framework that is stuck in the old paradigm, all the while preserving the unity and catholicity of the Church.”¹⁰³ And so on. Thinking politically, historically, or journalistically *about* theology is not the same thing as thinking theologically. It is certainly no way to think about what is true, which cannot be conceived within these thought forms.

nation invests him” (ibid.). The clericalism that flows from this understanding is easily recognizable. “The greater one’s power, the greater the temptation to think oneself its ultimate source, and the uglier its corruption. The power to give God and its consequent power over souls, which belong to the ordained ministry, are by far the greatest powers man knows. The priest’s sinful forgetfulness that his power is being given to him, that it is filial, makes him believe that he is the ultimate origin and destiny of people’s lives. Clericalism is in this light the most radical distortion of power, because it is the use of God and his people to affirm oneself. Concerning the way a priest relates to everything, the instantiations of this corruption of priestly power are manifold: restless activism; verbosity in the confessional; the aestheticism of pompous liturgies; self-referential spiritual direction; soulless and mechanical prayers; self-centered preaching; uncertain guidance of people; self-aggrandizing administration; the avoidance and management of human relations through bureaucratic procedures; the use of human weakness and suffering to impose oneself and one’s ideas on the faithful; and, most hideously, the abuse of the innocent and the young to exercise through them a denial of God” (260).

101. Del Noce discusses this “somewhat farcical-looking character” in his 1967 essay, “On Catholic Progressivism,” which is remarkably prescient about our present situation. The essay is translated and reprinted in Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 236–66, at 253.

102. Faggioli, “Synodality? What’s Synodality?”

103. Faggioli, “The Emergence of Synodality and the Inadequacy of Canon Law.”

Truth does not seem to be a very prominent category in discussions of synodality and the “new paradigm.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Faggioli is not shy about exercises of papal power, but in his interpretation of Vatican II even papal primacy “is not really (or no longer) about defining the faith. Rather, it is about witnessing and confirming the faith of the people, voiced in the consensus of their representatives in light of Scripture and Tradition.”¹⁰⁵ He simply disregards the centrality of the “truth question” in the two previous pontificates—not to mention the encyclicals *Veritatis splendor*, *Fides et ratio*, and *Caritas in veritate*—instead reducing doctrine to doctrinal policy, that is, to a political position.¹⁰⁶

As Alasdair MacIntyre and Del Noce have discussed, indifference to truth is a hallmark of sociologicistic and bureaucratic rationality, which is concerned with the administration of persons and things by means of the appropriate technical, political, managerial, or therapeutic techniques for ends that are often unarticulated or invisible.¹⁰⁷ Bureaucratic rationality thus reduces authority to power by detaching power from its inherent ordination to goodness and truth.

Bureaucratic processes are naturally manipulable, and they conceal unaccountable accumulation and exercises of power behind the supposed neutrality of procedures and the alleged objectivity of the social sciences. An example is the use of questionnaires, recently praised by Pope Francis as an instance of synodal listening. It bears repeating that such instruments of empirical analysis cannot adjudicate questions of truth, but only relationships between “facts.” Their prominence within the synodal process is a worrisome sign that the social sciences are supplanting philosophy and theology as the primary mode of ecclesial thinking, that the theological meaning of the *sensus fidelis* is being replaced by a sociological one, and that truth is being subordinated to various social, psychological, and economic conditions.

104. See Michael Hanby, “A False Paradigm,” *First Things*, November 2018, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/11/a-false-paradigm>.

105. Faggioli, “Synodality and Papal Primacy.” Notice once again the reductive, sociological sense of “consensus” and “people.”

106. Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 11, 15.

107. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 23–35, 88–108.

This is reflected in the therapeutic tone of some of the discussion questions employed in synodal “listening sessions.”

It should also be pointed out that the Church’s use of these devices fails even to meet the conventional criteria of rigor in the social sciences. The only way to approximate the goal of “consulting everyone” in the so-called “global Church” is *not* to consult everyone but to conduct scientific polling using random samples. Self-selecting questionnaires such as these are notoriously unscientific; they fail to ascertain the “average” opinion—Péguy’s nice old lady from the parish, for example—because they favor the activist and those sufficiently motivated by a cause to respond of their own initiative to the poll. This is especially true when many of the discussion questions appear simply to apply religious gloss to questions from a diversity, equity, and inclusion workshop.

One discussion asks, “How is God speaking to us through the voices that are in our midst? How is God speaking to us through voices we sometimes ignore, including those on the peripheries? What space is there to listen to the voices on the peripheries, especially cultural groups, women, the disabled, those who experience poverty, marginalization, or social exclusion?”¹⁰⁸ Another invites small group participants to reflect on their experiences of parish life: “From your small group sharing, name one insight where you heard the voice of the Holy Spirit today?”¹⁰⁹ Participants are typically given one to two minutes to reply. It is by methods such as these that the Church is supposed to enter the path of communal discernment, but there is nothing here of the traditional rigor or seriousness of the *discretio spirituum*: no examination of conscience; no acknowledgment of personal and structural sin and its accompanying blindness; no effort to distinguish between the voice of the Holy Spirit and the spirit of the age speaking incessantly (and in similar language) through the media; no awareness that the crafting of the meeting agenda might shape in advance

108. Synod parish resources can be found at <https://www.synod.va/en.html>. As if the group sessions themselves were not enough to promote an infantile form of the faith, the resource materials are produced to look as if they were written in crayon.

109. Archdiocese of Washington, “Synodal Conversations Recorder Notes,” available at <https://adw.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/10/21Synod-Notetaker-sheet-FINAL-1.pdf>.

what the Spirit is allowed to say; no suggestion that the voice of the Holy Spirit ought to be approached in fear and trembling; not even an acknowledgment that the “voice of the Holy Spirit” might be difficult to hear.

The essential emptiness of such contrived listening processes is familiar to anyone schooled in the ordinary experience of modern life—in one’s daily dealings with customer service departments, airlines, or the department of motor vehicles—as well as to anyone who has undergone the excruciating experience of sitting through a consultation process with archdiocesan officials. Frequent mention of the Holy Spirit and the superaddition of a “liturgical core” does not fill this void or transform what these processes are in essence.

It will be a miracle indeed if the voice of the Holy Spirit is discerned from these curated data sets. It would be no less miraculous if these data collection processes succeed in “recovering the legitimacy of ecclesial spaces,”¹¹⁰ whatever that means. Whatever real “legitimacy” the Church enjoys derives from the authority of truth, not from some pseudo-democratic processes. The more likely result is the one that such data sets are often constructed to produce: either a failed attempt to placate the masses by making them feel as though they are “being heard” in some sort of democratic process or to provide the cover of a manufactured *sensus fidelium* for predetermined “pastoral decisions” that, in their concrete specificity, “correspond as closely as possible to the will of God” but in fact contradict it.¹¹¹

Faggioli speaks approvingly of “ecclesial processes that are less centered on the clergy and more open to the leadership of the laity, especially women.”¹¹² But, of course, they are not open to everybody. They do not seem to be open for those on the receiving end of *Traditionis custodes*, who are denounced as schismatics and enemies of the pope by many of the same people championing synodality, people who never seem to take responsibility for their own considerable role in the boom of anti-Vatican II

110. Faggioli, “Synodality? What’s Synodality?”

111. ITC, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” 68.

112. Faggioli, “Whose Synodality?”

traditionalism.¹¹³ Nor is it all women or all the laity to whom such processes are really open, especially as the consultation becomes more global in scope. Rather, the very means of attaining the opinions of “everybody” legitimize the expertise of those curating and interpreting the data—the community of “international scholarship” employing historical and sociological methods to whose authority Faggioli often appeals for the normative meaning of the council.¹¹⁴ The subordination of theology to the judgment of history and sociology will almost certainly entail the practical transference of authority—though perhaps not executive power—from the local bishops to centralized bureaucracies of experts.

113. This is not to deny that there is now a serious problem of anti-Vatican II traditionalism from the Catholic right and a great deal of animosity toward Pope Francis along with it. Yet Faggioli, perhaps emboldened by the fact that Benedict XVI is no longer pope, is now bolder and more strident than he was in his 2012 writings when Benedict XVI was still pope. He now accuses Benedict and his “doctrinal policies” of thwarting Vatican II in a way only hinted at in his earlier writings, blaming him for the traditionalist backlash. “The new Catholic right,” he writes, “can now take advantage of the fact that, thanks to Francis’s predecessor, the papacy is no longer identifiable with the task of defending *ex officio* the conciliar teachings and its reforms (promulgated by Paul VI and canonized by Francis). The problem stems from Benedict’s ‘policies on Vatican II’ and ‘the rupture that Benedict XVI created in advancing liturgical traditionalism (see 2007’s *Summorum pontificum*)’” (Faggioli, “Traditionalism, American Style”). We should first note Faggioli’s astonishing hubris in making himself (and perhaps “international scholarship”) the arbiter of “the conciliar teaching and its reforms.” The magisterial interpretation of the previous popes is not doctrine, it seems, but merely doctrinal policy. But then, it must be asked, why did this “rupture” not assume this “virulent” form between 2007 and 2013? Why has it only reached a boiling point in recent years? There are no doubt myriad factors, but any honest assessment of them would have to include the campaign (by Faggioli, Ivereigh, and others) to delegitimize John Paul II and Benedict XVI’s magisterial interpretations of the council, so that the conciliar vision they rejected might be installed as the “canonical” expression of the council. It must also include the relentless social media campaign, the attempt to portray as “enemies of Francis,” those who do not regard doctrine as mere doctrinal policy and therefore considered the earlier magisterium to be authoritative. Any such assessment would show that in these campaigns to erase the magisteria of John Paul II and Benedict XVI and demonize their adherents, they have done more than virtually anyone to boost the fortunes of traditionalism. Any Catholic who concluded that Faggioli and his party politics represents the authentic meaning of the council would be forced in good conscience to reject it. Pope Francis and his own magisterial authority has been ill-served by such self-appointed defenders.

114. See Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 15–17, 91–117. For the legitimization of managerial expertise by the social sciences, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 88–108.

Such an eventuality would fulfill the prediction of Joseph Ratzinger that, if “synodality” were elevated, it would, under the guise of decentralization, reduce the authority of local bishops over their own diocese and effect a recentralization under what would “amount to a second Roman Curia”—albeit a Curia of expertise. The assumption would be that “only representation in the center would make [laymen] important for the whole.”¹¹⁵ The fundamental issue here is not, as Ratzinger makes clear, how power might be distributed or redistributed politically in practice among clergy and laity. “If we were to act upon this notion so as to overcome *papal* centralism, it would only introduce a new and much cruder centralism that would cause the authentic nature of the Church to fade away and would subject her to the logic of modern theories about the state.”¹¹⁶

The fundamental issues at stake in the implementation of the “synodal process” concern the very nature of the Church herself and whether this process is a faithful interpretation of the council and a true reading of the signs of the times. These are theological, not sociological or historical, questions. The words of Blondel are once again pertinent.

It should be obvious already that to lay down without more ado the basic doctrinal affirmation of the thirteenth century is not only to stop up all access to those who think in terms of our own time, but also to make a hopeless attempt to recover for one’s own mind an equilibrium which has been irretrievably lost, which could remain stable only because further distinctions had not yet been made and certain problems had not yet appeared. To think in our day in precisely the same terms as five centuries ago is inevitably to think in a different spirit.¹¹⁷

What is true of five centuries is true of five decades. An ossified postconciliar progressivism would be no more able to discern the meaning of our historical moment, and no less extrinsicist, than an ossified neo-Scholasticism. Even if the Second Vatican

115. Joseph Ratzinger, “Questions about the Structure and Duties of the Synod of Bishops,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 868.

116. *Ibid.*

117. Blondel, “The Letter on Apologetics,” 149.

Council had succeeded in 1968 in speaking in one “optimistic voice” about the modern world, an interpretation that would require one to ignore a substantial portion of what the council documents actually say, there is no reason why the Council Fathers’ assessment of *their* times should apply to our own. Times change. That is why they are times. Historicists, of all people, ought to understand this. But since Catholicism is not historicism, Catholics typically make bad historicists. They always arrive at least a half century too late at a world that no longer exists. Del Noce wrote of the sort of Catholics who used to speak of assimilating the partial truth found in Marxism, that “the demonstration that atheism is essential to Marxism leaves him utterly indifferent.”¹¹⁸ So today we find Catholic progressives like Faggioli, prattling on about democracy and rights and egalitarianism, imagining that they are defending the world from fascism, as if it were 1968. . . or 1938. Meanwhile, they are indifferent to the fact that the inner logic of democratic societies is propelling them toward new, postpolitical forms of totalitarianism.

Whether the implementation of synodality is faithful to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council is impossible to say with finality as of yet. What can be said is that it is impossible in principle to be true to the council by forcibly imposing upon the whole Church, whether through ecclesiastical power or the power of the media, one side of a polarity that the council sought to transcend and overcome. This would be no less a betrayal than the restoration of a traditionalism that rejects Vatican II altogether.

Both points will be answered, in theory and in practice, by the answer to a still more fundamental question. In his speech at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII stated in emphatic terms the council’s central purpose: “The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously. That doctrine embraces the whole of man, composed as he is of body and soul. And, since he is a pilgrim on this earth, it commands him to tend always toward heaven.”¹¹⁹

118. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 245.

119. *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 11.

Times change, but the truth of this doctrine does not, however much it may grow and develop, like an organism, over the course of centuries. It is by this purpose that fidelity to the council will ultimately be determined. When the eclipse of God has cast a shadow upon the hope of a genuinely human future; when every kind of authority has disintegrated into raw power; when this power is dispersed throughout a vast technocratic leviathan without seat or center or real bearers of political responsibility; when it has acquired the theoretical, technical, and political capacity to abolish human nature and subject it to technological control; the question will be whether in the midst of this troubled history the synodal Church adhered to the eternal God and whether it stood—suffering and alone if necessary—for the reality of creation, nature, truth, and the moral order. Or did it accompany them into eclipse and oblivion? “Time is greater than space,”¹²⁰ which means the processes we have launched into the stream of time elude our control by their very nature and that the attempt to “colonize spaces” and thereby command the future is destined to fail. Those devotees of sociologism who have exchanged the authority of truth for ecclesial power have made it unlikely that this pope, or a future pope, will provide the answer to these questions.¹²¹ History will decide—and God will judge. □

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120. *Evangelii gaudium*, 222.

121. Faggioli exhibits anxiety that his understanding of synodality might not be implemented before there is another, less genial pope, a sure indication that the reduction of doctrine to “doctrinal policy” reduces authority to sheer power. “The specter of a universal pope-like role for the Patriarch of Constantinople haunts some Eastern Orthodox Churches, but the complicated nature of papal primacy should not be too quickly overlooked by Catholics. It now tends to be dismissed as irrelevant because of the friendly, genteel style of Pope Francis. But if synodality is to be a key aspect of being Church in the future of Catholicism, this means that we need to keep in mind that at some point, in the next few years, there will be another pope. And he could have a style of interpreting synodality that is very different from that of the current Bishop of Rome” (Faggioli, “Synodality and Papal Primacy”).