

## Notes and Comments

### A New Reformation?

The Vatican's recent announcement of a new Apostolic Constitution, *Anglicanorum coetibus*, creating personal ordinariates to receive Anglicans *en masse* into the Roman Catholic Church, sent reporters and commentators scrambling for superlatives. Some pronounced it "stunning" and "extraordinary"; while a few veteran observers, perhaps not wanting to appear blindsided by the announcement, downgraded the event to "important but anticipated"—the assumption being that "stunning" and "anticipated" are mutually exclusive alternatives.

I want to propose that this is indeed a moment of great importance—stunning, extraordinary, monumental even—but that its significance is liable to remain altogether invisible unless we are able to read the "signs of the times." This is difficult in any event, but our present cultural situation makes this difficulty worse. The Church thinks in theology and in centuries. Insofar as we are creatures of this culture we think in journalism, which means that we hardly remember what it is to think, and we do so *sub specie duae annorum*, as Nietzsche is reported to have put it—generously it turns out—in the age before the internet. He, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others are thus surely correct that one

sign of our cultural and intellectual degeneracy is that we no longer possess the ability to recognize it. We don't see what we don't see. Add to that the possibility that we no longer really *want* to see, that truth seems to have all but relinquished its claim on a desire that is all but extinguished, and the difficulty appears even greater still.

Since we are therefore mostly armchair empiricists whose gaze does not extend much beyond the horizon of the present moment, what began in superlatives has thus far tended to end in banalities. This seems especially the case among Catholics. Catholics on both the left and right have each tended to assume, and in some cases to fear, a massive influx of Anglicans crossing the Tiber. Those on the right have rejoiced at the prospect of a Catholic African subcontinent and have dared to hope (as I admit I do) that such an influx would further hasten the end of the long silly season of liturgical abuse, while those on the left have wrung their hands at the prospect of throwing open the doors of the Church to a lace-clad army of "homophobes" and "misogynists."

Both appear to assume that the significance of this event will be measurable, and measurable *now*, but neither gives much evidence of familiarity with the lay of the Anglican landscape, whether in the U.S., the U.K., or Africa, and neither shows much evidence of familiarity with the upheaval that is conversion. Much of the

world-wide “conservative” resistance to liberalizing moves within the Episcopal Church and the Church of England comes not from the small “Anglo-Catholic” minority, but from evangelicals, whose outlook and ecclesiology makes this invitation less than compelling *a priori*. Those who have rejoiced or lamented that an influx of Anglo-Catholics might dilute a perceived gay subculture among American clerics seem unaware of a substantial gay culture within Anglo-Catholicism that isn’t subterranean at all. Nor do Americans seem to appreciate the substantial structural and cultural *differences* between ECUSA and the C of E, in particular the deep attachment of the English to their mediaeval parish churches. To paraphrase one of my best friends who is a priest in the Church of England, it is hard to imagine the Bishop of Ely saying, “Right then, you can just take Little St. Mary’s.” And it is just as hard to imagine the congregation of Little St. Mary’s (just to use a familiar example) walking away without its building to take up residence in some pre-fabricated aluminum structure. Perhaps more fundamentally still, the pope’s surprising overture presents the fragile British constitutional order, a pre-modern anachronism perennially in search of its continuing justification, with something of a constitutional crisis. And it has revealed how deeply rooted is British (or at least English) identity in the English Reformation, perhaps the most direct cause of the modern absolute state. After all, it is neither the rank and file Anglican

layman nor the Anglican hierarchy, but the irreligious commentariat in the secular press who have characterized Benedict’s overture as “poaching” and written of the pope parking his tanks on Rowan Williams’ lawn. This point is equally difficult for secular liberals and for contemporary Catholics to grasp. In the main, neither tend to recognize the *theological* meaning of the state (and modern political identity) or the fact that it is born (first on English soil) in counter-identification with the Catholic Church (though none of this is to deny a residual “folk catholicism,” especially in the culture of the English village, which nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholicism was able to retrieve and exploit). As a consequence, Catholics tend to regard the German Reformation as more theologically significant than the English, whose significance is mostly relegated to the *merely* political. The upshot, at any rate, is that “Englishness” (and “Britishness”), for whatever else they are, remain inherently religious notions which are liable to exert an enormous pressure upon dissident congregations within the C of E to stay put and may well issue in a lukewarm reception from many of their Catholic brethren, who have only recently succeeded in allaying the suspicion that one cannot be truly English and Roman Catholic at the same time. All of which is to say that the practical effect of the pope’s invitation is likely to be rather small in the near term and terribly convoluted in any event. But then, reformations always are.

Pope Benedict's personal ordinariates are stunning and extraordinary not fundamentally for what they may do, but for what they *are* and what they *mean*. For the first time since the Reformation, though we pray not the last, they put in place a concrete bridge whereby "separated brethren" in the Western Church can return to full communion without simply renouncing the last five hundred years and without being ripped utterly in two, without feeling as if assent to the fullness of the faith means denying that their traditions and the people who nurtured them in those traditions have been real vehicles of grace. Among the people I've known, it is not pride that prevents them from denying this but the conviction that it isn't true and the unintelligibility of their own conversion if it were. As a former Anglican recently converted to Catholicism, I can say from first-hand experience what an enormous gift it is to be relieved of that burden, irrespective of whether the Church ever really demanded such a renunciation in the first place. Just the existence of such a bridge is profoundly important, even if the bishops of the TAC or Anglican Bishops in Fort Worth or Pittsburgh or Nigeria decline at this moment to lead their flocks across it. But given the unlikely prospects of dramatic "ecclesial migration" in the near term, what grounds—apart from divine providence—do we have for hoping in a "New Reformation"? And what sort of reformation might it be if we can barely even see it?

I am neither a prophet nor the son

of a prophet, but I will hazard a somewhat apocalyptic guess at what I think will happen (is happening). Several astute theologians and historians have wondered aloud in recent years, in the wake of the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue on justification, for example, or the unprecedented cooperation between Catholics and Evangelicals on matters of common moral concern, whether and to what extent the Reformation remains theological. Ultimately, I believe it to be profoundly theological; indeed I believe that the deepest theological meaning of the Reformation is only now becoming clear. I will try to elaborate this meaning a bit as we proceed. Nevertheless, these thinkers are on to something, namely, the fact that few Protestant denominations maintain their separation from Rome out of commitment to the same theological convictions that prompted that separation in the first place. Who on the right or left side of the Anglican wars holds their ground out of commitment to the Thirty-Nine Articles? Indeed who on either side does not actually find their denunciations of vain "Romish" doctrines slightly embarrassing? Lack of commitment to the Articles is presumably one reason why ECUSA has hidden them away, like the crazy old aunt of a less compassionate age, in the dusty attic of its "Historical Documents" where they may be regarded as interesting, or even amusing, but hardly of relevance for the progressive future. So while I am firmly of the mind that there is *no* concern that isn't ultimately theological, we surely have

to concede that a great deal of blame for the maintenance of the Reformation in its current form goes not to recalcitrant differences in doctrine but to more proximate causes such as class divisions, bureaucratic inertia, property issues, residual resistance to authority, and the wholly legitimate love of a tradition.

Any rumors hailing the death of Protestantism are thus greatly exaggerated. There will remain nominally Christian communities that are largely indistinguishable from the culture, devout Christians who fall outside of full visible communion with Rome, and “Catholics” (the controversial use of that appellation notwithstanding) who remain “trapped” on islands within other traditions, not least by their own wholly legitimate love for those traditions and for the people they share them with. Love is a weight, after all, and a wound. Conversion is extraordinarily difficult, even when one is converting out of anger and disgust—hardly the best reasons—from something one has come to despise. For it not only requires you to deny yourself in ways that cut very close to home and threaten to render your life incoherent, but it always means denying your father, mother, and brother and taking up the cross in painful ways that are impossible to circumvent. But when you are converting from something that you *love*, something which has nurtured you, something which you *owe*, the experience can be excruciating. I know this too from first-hand experience.

All of this is sufficient, in other

words, to insure a good deal of anguish in Christendom for quite a long time, and overtures such as the pope’s, while they are cause for great hope and joy, are nevertheless only likely to intensify it. This is because insofar as the Reformation is not sustained by theology, or rather insofar as the real theological stakes of the Reformation remain misidentified, none of the factors currently upholding it is sufficient to prevent it from succumbing to the ravages of contemporary culture or is capable of preserving those traditions in their distinction from that culture. Because the Reformation is proving unsustainable in its classical form, the “Rome question” has forced itself on individuals and communities alike with increased urgency in recent years. I hope eventually to provide some insight here as to why that is the case. As exhibit A, I offer the protracted deathbed scene of so-called Mainline Protestantism in the U.S., which has been occurring right before our eyes for quite some time. I suspect that its demise is due not only to the defection of theological and moral “conservatives” to friendlier Catholic and Evangelical climates, but to the fact that religion which is indistinguishable from a culture such as this one provides little rationale for adhering to it. It is the same reason why the graying “spirit of Vatican II” has been less fruitful in animating a second generation than in catechizing its children out of the Church altogether. If I could get the same peace of mind or self-affirmation from sipping a latte at Starbucks and reading the *New York*

*Times* on Sunday morning as I get from the therapeutic sensitivity and insufferable moralism of a homily extolling me to lower my carbon footprint, I know which one I would choose (the one without the bad music). Assuming, however, that our degeneration is not so total as to be unrecognizable and that there are thus still people sufficiently moved by truth, beauty, and goodness to get worked up about it, the coming years are likely to force a crisis for many people who do find themselves trapped aboard sinking ecclesial ships. For as modern Western culture continues to unveil its true character, those with eyes to see and ears to hear who belong to traditions without the theological and philosophical wherewithal to distinguish themselves from this culture are increasingly likely to find themselves confronted with an unavoidable choice.

That ours is now a thoroughly post-Christian culture has long been obvious. Only now, however, as our capacity to manipulate our nature and that of our posterity outstrips our capacity for thinking about it and as the political, industrial, and economic leviathans created by human artifice fulfill their Hobbesian logic and defy the control of their makers, is this post-Christian culture beginning to reveal clearly its true post-*human* face. Only now are the fateful seeds planted in the Baconian “triumph of art over nature” maturing to bear their poisonous fruit, as the human person, emptied of the unity and interiority conferred on it by essence and gratuitous

existence and conceived instead as a mechanical artifact, succumbs ever more fully to human engineering. It makes little difference, in the end, whether this artifact is the work of the sort of extrinsic, “Intelligent Designer God” that Darwinians don’t believe in, or of the chance and necessity that they do. The end result is the same; the difference between the natural and the artificial, the animate and the inanimate, is erased to the benefit of the latter. Everything in the Ratzinger-Benedict *corpus* points to a keen appreciation of this and a real sense of urgency over its dangers.

As children of the Hobbesian “artificial man,” our default ontology is more or less Cartesian, albeit usually in its monist and materialist variant, which means that we regard matter—and thus our own living bodies—as external to meaning by definition. Inevitably, then, we regard the pressing moral issues of the day in thoroughly moralistic terms, in terms which assume that *morality*, a matter of mere “values” in the crudest formulations of this view, bears little or no relation to *reality*. The more “liberal” adherents of this ontology therefore regard the Church’s position on diverse issues such as women’s ordination, contraception, same-sex unions, abortion, artificial reproduction, or embryonic stem-cell research as an authoritarian imposition of an ultimately arbitrary morality, while “conservative” adherents, who consent to these teachings, often do so without reference to the vision of the human person that binds the teachings into a

unity, much less seeing what is ultimately at stake in them.

It should be rather hard to miss. For underlying and binding together these diverse concerns and preoccupations is a single question which is arguably the defining question of the last two pontificates: whether the human body—the sexually differentiated bodies of men and women—has any inherent meaning prior to the arbitrary imposition of one by an act of will. At issue, in other words, is whether the human person is actually a *person* at all, a *per se unum* of body and soul, or whether the person is really the epiphenomenon of an indifferent material artifact that is passive and plastic before the meaningless algorithms of natural selection and the constructive ambitions of the affective or technological will. The fascinating link that Pope Benedict has drawn between “human ecology” and “environmental ecology” attests to the importance of this question in his mind and to the way that it underlies issues which, on the surface, appear to have little to do with each other. We should have seen it coming. Cardinal Ratzinger signaled his deep concern for the fate of all things human in a technological age over twenty years ago. In his homilies on creation, he lamented the virtual disappearance of creation from modern theology and called for renewed reflection on this ancient doctrine, arguing that the world itself hangs in the balance. For he maintained that the fundamental question at stake in creation in this technological culture is not so much

whether God exists, but whether human beings do. To answer this question in the affirmative is immediately to raise difficult questions about the language or meaning of the personal body, what it says, as it were, how it speaks and how it represents the gift at its origin. Questions about virginity, marriage, and ordination are ultimately questions about this, even if, as often seems to be the case, the protagonists on either side of these questions are unaware of the fact or unaware of all that is entailed in the answers they provide to them. And John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, though it is frequently misunderstood and often trivialized, is arguably the most profound attempt to date to supply an answer to them.

There is of course an all-pervasive “joyful nihilism” that denies that the body speaks or represents at all and glories instead in the muteness which permits the will to triumph over it. This triumph goes by the name of “freedom” or “liberation,” and it can take either an affective or a technological form. However, since the two forms share a common ontology, they are not mutually exclusive and are indeed less so all the time, as so-called “reproductive technologies,” for instance—a phrase whose very syntax converts the fruit of love into the product of manufacture—has made it possible to circumvent the limitations of sex and gender and may eventually circumvent any recognizably human biology altogether. (Only today I ran across a breathless article asking whether “artificial wombs” might be

the new frontier in fertility science.) And the now axiomatic distinction that separates a “purely biological sex” from a “socially constructed gender” is typically called upon to do the heavy conceptual lifting on behalf of this vision of freedom.

Of course, individual Christian thinkers and whole ecclesial communities who have embraced various “liberationist” agendas have also had recourse to this and similar distinctions in order to work on behalf of “same-sex marriage” and the associated range of issues. I would not wish to attribute this nihilism to the proponents of this agenda as a matter of *motive*, any more than I would wish to attribute it to a couple who, in the pain and desperation of infertility and wanting only a child, take tacit recourse to this distinction by availing themselves of these technologies. Its proponents are moved by the recognition of real historical injustice, a great deal of real suffering, and a genuinely human desire for freedom. However, any argument for freedom that entails liberation from the body, any argument that conceives of the person as an abstract and androgynous bearer of rights before he or she is (concretely) a son or a daughter, separates love and freedom from the persons whose love and freedom it is. On the one hand, this reduces the meaning of love to a matter of (private) will or affection, thus denying it any ontological foothold. On the other hand, this bifurcates the person, handing nature and the body wholly over to the administration of the bureaucratic state and

the instrumental rationality of science, with their view of an ultimately meaningless reality and the ineffectual moralism that attends it. The faith thus reduced to fideism and pietism then becomes utterly adventitious to the meaning of natural and physical reality as natural and physical. This is one reason why, when push comes to shove, it is so easily jettisoned. And since the instrumental rationality of liberal bureaucracy and positive science acknowledge no reality outside themselves, even the affective constructs of the will succumb to them eventually. Witness the state’s re-definitions of marriage and parenthood and the rise of neo-Darwinism as an omnivorous “theory of everything” including religion, ethics, and culture. Dualism always becomes materialistic monism sooner or later.

The will-to-power unleashed by this fit of destruction ultimately plays no favorites, however, and it is not difficult to envision some of the myriad ways in which this joy may soon turn to weeping. In fact, one needn’t look very deeply into the penchant for self-mutilation on display throughout popular culture to see that this apparent joy is already a mask for weeping, just as the unshakeable faith in progress really just puts a happy face on fate, counseling resignation in the face of an inevitable destiny impervious to human agency. Benedict does us a great favor in the latest encyclical, incidentally, by attempting to dissuade us of this kind of despair. He reminds us that while artifacts that exceed human scale defy human control, they

remain *human* artifacts nevertheless, susceptible in spite of everything to humanization, provided that we ourselves do not utterly forget what that means.

Let us nevertheless consider briefly the sort of thing that may happen if we do forget. Let us imagine, momentarily, that neo-Darwinian biology proceeds apace in its quest to reduce the human person to the aggregate of its genes. What happens if and when that elusive genetic component in homosexuality is finally discovered? Now I don't believe for a minute that this sort of genetic reductionism can do justice to a complex phenomenon such as homosexuality or any other biological phenomenon for that matter. For one thing, reductionism of this sort illicitly abstracts parts such as a genetic code from the being whose code it is and then imagines that the organism is simply built up from its parts like any other artifact. There are numerous problems with this both biological and philosophical. But insofar as a person is a true *per se unum*, it is reasonable to expect *some* detectable genetic or material correlate for phenomena such as homosexuality. So the possibility is not at all far-fetched. What happens, then, when this genetic marker is detectable by pre-natal genetic diagnosis? The day could well come when homosexuality goes the way of Down syndrome babies. On that day, even the gay activist who has made his living vilifying the pope and the Church may be happily surprised to discover that he has a friend in a frail

old man in a white cassock who still remembers what a human being is.

Beneath the old controversies that have roiled Christendom for these five hundred years and the new controversies which are now internally dividing its fragments lies a still more basic question: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost visit him?" One wonders how long we will have the luxury of quarreling over secondary questions and ignoring this primary one. Not long, I suspect. As our technological culture answers this question with a resounding "nothing" and as it acquires ever more audacious and powerful means to put that answer into practice, as the effects of this answer are felt in broken lives, broken families, broken cultures beaten into submission by their instruments, and incredibly well financed acts of biotechnological barbarism that were unthinkable less than a generation ago, the question will refuse to be ignored. It will demand a hearing. Dissident Christian traditions do not lack the answer to this question, but they lack it in full. And partial answers will not suffice, since the parceling up of the human person is the very problem demanding an answer.

The long shadow of the Reformation takes on a clearer shape in the light of this problem, as one would expect if the claim of *Gaudium et spes*, 22, John Paul II's hermeneutical key for interpreting the Second Vatican Council, is correct: that Christ reveals man to himself. If this is true, then it follows that fragmentation and divi-



sion within the Body of Christ is tantamount to the fragmentation and division of the human person itself. In other words, the Reformation—and now I mean not only the internal division of the Western Church but the religiously secular regime of political liberalism, industrial capitalism, and scientific positivism that issues from it—is a rupture in fundamental anthropology that threatens to extinguish all that is truly human in us. Here we arrive at what I take to be the deepest theological meaning of the Reformation. It turns not on whether the Son assumed human nature—most communities that identify themselves as Christian still agree on *that*—but rather, ultimately, on whether there really is such a thing as nature, including human nature, for the Son to assume. Of course the answer to this question determines not only the meaning of the Incarnation and every other theological question, but whether we can any longer mount a coherent and comprehensive defense of the *humanum*.

It is around this question of fundamental anthropology and the salvation of the *humanum* that the New Reformation is likely to take place, even if that too is not always fully clear to the people and communities that take part in it. For it is ultimately this question that is dividing Protestant communities internally, and it is ultimately the Church's various attempts to maintain and even deepen the understanding of the human person as a *per se unum*, a meaningful body called in love to a gift that is comprehensive, complete,

and fruitful, that has provoked the most vociferous opposition from the world, from other Christian communities, and from within the Church itself. These facts suggest that the Catholic Church, though battered and bruised from without and humiliated by scandal within, will remain for all that the last bastion of a complete and genuine humanism capable of comprehending the incomprehensible mystery of the person in its totality. As those who find themselves stranded have this question forced upon them, they may find, like Peter himself, that there is nowhere else to turn.

This point raises difficult questions about the nature of the Church's Marian inviolability and its expression in the unity of the Petrine ministry, questions which ultimately await eschatological resolution. The Church's "virgin inviolability" must be true, but not *simply* so. Liberals who deny its truth only acquiesce in further dismembering the ecclesial and personal body and fly in the face of the historical reality that the magisterium *has* safeguarded the unity of Catholic truth and the unity of the human person in a way that no other ecclesial body has, while conservatives who affirm it simply and who regard the Reformation as an external problem that is of no real loss to the Church tend to enact this inviolate unity as a fortress impervious to the real suffering of the world. It is difficult to see how one could square this view with the Catholic understanding that the various Protestant denominations are not separate churches, but separated

members of the one Catholic Church, much less how one could square it with the ruins of Fountains Abbey and the sad spectacle of crumbling, empty churches in what was once Catholic Europe. And it is difficult to see how one could square it with Benedict's unprecedented gesture, which is why this gesture has the power to upset liberals and conservatives alike.

Contrary to the fears of some in the European press, the Church which emerges will more likely resemble the Church in the ruins of the old Roman order at the start of the Middle Ages than the Church which commanded Europe at the end of them. The decisive difference is that the Church now lives in the midst of a post-Christian culture premised in its very foundations on a "no" to the Catholic vision of reality, a culture, therefore, which neither knows itself nor really wants to. This presents an infinitely more difficult job. This is why the Church of the New Reformation is just as likely to be composed of earnest and grateful refugees from now dissident traditions as it is of those who, upon discovery that the wind which listeth the ecclesial ship isn't the Spirit of Vatican II, remain on shore or are pulled passively along by it. The Church of the New Reformation is thus more likely to resemble the sort of "creative minority" that Benedict has spoken of, and creative it had better be. The provision of "personal ordinariates" for Anglicans is an example of such creativity, laying one foundation stone in the creation of

this minority and exhibiting the true spirit of the council and the true form of its openness to the world. If this should come to pass, and if the world should respond in kind, it will surely be stunning, extraordinary, monumental even, though it may well remain all but invisible to the naked eye. And if it should come to pass, and if history should take note of it, it may show that the "new St. Benedict" awaited by MacIntyre has indeed arrived. Let us hope so. And let us hope it is in time. □

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