

Colloquī

March 15, 2019
Volume 03, Number 33



A journal for restless minds

Today And Tomorrow

Leaving the past in the past

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Today And Tomorrow

Leaving the past in the past

Some years ago I was engaged in the catechetical preparation of teenagers for the Sacrament of Confirmation. These were, in the main, young people attending various local public high schools without the benefit of being raised within a devout Catholic environment, some or most rarely having had any religious instruction or even the most rudimentary understanding of the Catholic faith—a near universal reality among all who self-identify as a Catholic.

Many of the students attended simply because of cultural misconceptions—the most common being that the Sacrament of Confirmation was required for marriage in the Catholic Church—while others came because of pressure from their

family to do so. Few, if any, attended for the sacramental grace they could and would receive or to become soldiers for Christ, full members of the Catholic Church.

As a preparer of young souls perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome was the almost universal absence of any understanding of what it means to be Catholic; such ignorance generally a product of a severe lack of religious education, either from the parents or catechists. How one is supposed to prepare anyone for the sacrament without even a scintilla of knowledge about God, faith and religious obligations was simply beyond my ability to comprehend.

Since that time, I have become increasingly convinced that ignorance of basic Catholic doctrine,



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dogma, and Tradition has tragically gone the way of the dinosaur, which is to say extinct, its bones long buried deep beneath the muck of the La Brea tar pits.

Such gross ignorance of what it means to be Catholic, of what Catholics are obliged to believe, obey and observe, and why—even the most rudimentary understanding of Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine—has become normative for the majority of Catholics—especially true for Catholics fifty years of age and younger although nowise limited to any age. Too many readily admit to believing in whatever seems the most comfortable, whatever feels right or makes them feel good. Most notably, there has been a weakening, a watering down of what we are to believe in to what might best be described as “Feeble Faith” among many over the last sixty years, so much so that fewer and fewer identifying Catholics know or care to know what it means or what is demanded of them as Catholics. It is as if to be Catholic is to be a member of a community club whose enduring motto is “What you don’t know can’t hurt you.”

When some Catholics began insisting ... that “there are no absolutes,” they were usually referring to the laws of morality. Yet there was a perhaps unintended pun involved, because it was finally the denial of the Absolute, or more accurately the flight from it, which was the essence of the Catholic crisis. There could be, obviously, no questioning of the reality of God. Yet there was a notably diminished interest in God for His own sake, a willingness to think about God only insofar as

He could be considered an immanent component of human existence. God, considered in and of Himself, was like a blinding light which blotted out every feature of the human landscape and on which human eyes could not gaze for long. To escape from that overwhelming presence, to diffuse that light into softened beams which did not hurt the eyes, became the aim of much of what passed for renewal. Sophisticated Christians ... insisted that they could no longer believe in a God “up there.” But more was involved in this disclaimer than the mere rejection of a crude physical concept. The rejection of a God up there often meant the turning of one’s back on the transcendent God altogether, a decision to deal with divinity only as it was mediated through the manageable channels of worldly existence.

Relatively few Catholics ever had the theological sophistication to appreciate deeply the central mysteries of their faith. But in its liturgy, its catechism, its popular devotions, the Church conveyed to people a strong sense of a transcendent and absolute God, an awareness of mystery, a realization that they were a part of a great cosmic process which shaped and gave meaning to their lives at every point.

The danger now is that having settled for a comfortably this-worldly religion, the religiously tone-deaf, as it were, will come to dominate the life of the Church. By a religious Gresham’s Law [“Bad money drives out good”] it has proved easier to “sell” ersatz liturgies, theologies, and spiritualities with strong contemporary flavor than to initiate people into the profoundest mysteries of their faith.

Traditional Catholicism is variously patronized, derided, condemned, or ignored by self-consciously modern Christians, on the equally various grounds that it is outdated, narrow,

inhuman, or incredible. Yet behind these sundry forms of rejection lies an unacknowledged fact: a firmly held belief in the eternal God, is a constant threat to the humanistic Catholicism so skillfully fashioned.... To take seriously the Absolute, to endeavor sincerely to see all of life under the aspect of eternity, is to impose great inconveniences on the comfortable arrangements which advanced modern Christians have made with the world. Thus the priest or the nun is tolerable in his or her role as “minister,” that is, as a professional specialist apply skills to the facilitation of community life. But the priest or the nun as representative of the sacred, as ambassador of God, cannot be tolerated. For the same reason not only are classic conversion stories no longer told, but those converts who entered the Church because they experienced the call of the absolute and unwavering God are sometimes the objects of hostility.

The “relevance” of Catholicism has always lain in its power, not its contemporaneity, that is, in its ability to communicate to the individual a sense of God’s majesty and unchanging will, along with the concomitant promise of eternal life. It is this which is now, under the misnomer of “triumphalism,” rejected by so many Churchmen who enjoy strategic influence. The Church’s crisis is not primarily intellectual, as it is often stated, not primarily the question of whether its doctrines are any longer credible....The crisis of the Church is not primarily intellectual and probably never was. It is personal and spiritual, a crisis of fundamental self-understanding and will. It proceeds from the failure of nerve, not the perplexities of the intellect.

A characteristic strategy ... has been to assert that certain traditional

beliefs had been overemphasized at the expense of certain others, a charge often enough true. In the process of "correcting" the misemphasis, however, the accepted belief was often disposed of completely, merely by virtue of ceasing to speak of it. In contemporary Catholicism perhaps no doctrine has suffered this fate more completely than the belief in life after death. Few indeed have denied it, or would do so. Many, however, have simply begun to act and speak as though it were not true; for practical purposes it has ceased to matter.

Yet historical Christianity makes quite clear that eternal life is not simply something added on at the end, a bonus given to faithful workers, but is central to belief in Jesus Christ. Thus on both theological and psychological levels the presence or absence of this belief cannot help but profoundly color all aspects of human existence. Belief in life after death is a threat to a determinedly this-worldly religion.¹

Within this cogent excerpt are a number of thoughts that bear further comment and explanation. First published forty years ago, there should be no doubt as to the radical and often untoward theological shifts that were occurring within the Catholic Church and the Catholic mind at that time. What should now be even more obvious is how this movement away from the Absolute has become the genesis of the current day "Feeble Faith" of so many professed Catholics.

As noted before, it is through *religious sentiment*, as modern philosophical thought is of wont to call it, that we can come to know of God and the supernatural.

God thus apprehended by the religious sentiment, is indwelling, immanent in the soul, and this doctrine of God indwelling in the soul and apprehended as revealing Himself to the soul, not by means of any external teaching, but through the soul's inward experience, is the doctrine of Vital Immanence.²

One of the philosophical foundations of Modernism has always been the doctrine of Vital Immanence. According to the modernist then, religion arises purely from within man himself, deriving all its credibility and force from man's own personal experience as its source. Religion essentially arise from an inner sentiment, emotion or feeling in the heart of man, and this sentiment is where, to the modernist, faith and revelation are located. This is also where the divine reality, God, originates.

[F]or God is the object and the giver of revelation; the revelation of God consists in that religious sentiment, God revealing and God revealed. Thus, in a sense, man himself turns out to be the creator of religion, of religious truth, of God Himself, rather than being the discoverer of it all.³

The essential point is that by rejecting or simply by not believing in God "up there," Catholics, whether knowingly or not, bought into the false and condemned doctrine of Vital Immanence. And as noted previously, this too often resulted in "turning one's back on the transcendent God altogether." Thus, this distancing of one's self from the transcendent God is not so much an intellectual crisis for the Church, but rather, a personal and spiritual crisis brought on by Catholics

neither knowing nor understanding the fundamental teachings of their faith.

Such vincible ignorance of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith can in no way be excused or dismissed. For as Aldous Huxley once said, "Most ignorance is vincible ignorance. We don't know because we don't want to know."

Nowhere perhaps does the modern Catholic draw a stricter line between acceptable and unacceptable religion than over the matter of joy and hope (the title, in fact, of the Second Vatican Council's declaration on *The Church in the Modern World*). Yet in the process the nature of these things for the Christian are badly misunderstood. The "gloomy" saints of the Church's rich history demonstrate the true nature of Christian joy and hope and the fact that, ultimately, these are not dependent on happiness as the world understands happiness, nor are they necessarily manifested in ways which the world will immediately recognize. For Christians life has meaning beyond earthly disappointments. The perspective of eternity, if taken seriously, makes all the difference.

What is at stake here is not this world versus the next, human good versus the divine will, a mentality which sees the world as merely a vale of tears and nothing more. That way of seeing was indeed a kind of heresy, and one which the Second Vatican Council strove to overcome. True humanism is also being undermined by a shallow and too consciously "relevant" faith. Many Christians are deliberately choosing to live life on the surface, within a manageable range of religious experiences.⁴

In the process of combatting the excessive rationalism and love of system which was characteristic of much older Catholic theology, an approach like this succeeds merely in trivializing the sacred mysteries, dissolving them in a bland stew palatable to any devotee of popular psychology. The Christian faith is made “relevant” at the cost of what it really has to say to the world. Its function is reduced to that of merely giving reinforcement to attitudes and ideas which certain segments of the population currently find meaningful. In doing this it is short-changing people even at the purely human level.

The new “relevant” Christianity has won its place in contemporary culture through its promise to be unobtrusive and untroublesome so far as the demands of enlightened worldliness are concerned. The price it has paid for this acceptance has been the loss of its own power and authority, its capacity to inspire and to mediate God’s life to man.

In seeking to make faith relevant and comfortable, within the confines of contemporary Western culture, many reformers have robbed it of even the possibility of grandeur. Recent reforms—in catechetics, in moral theology, in religious life, above all in liturgy—seem designed to prevent the very possibility of such a thing. The Catholic imagination is now thoroughly impoverished and expresses itself only in banalities. One of its greatest failures is precisely its inability to imagine the prospect of eternal life. Converts have been attracted to the Church not because they found there a warm human community (often they did not) but because they believed that what the Church taught was true, that it had the words of eternal life. Thus in making Catholicism more relevant on one level, these reformers succeeded in robbing it of its true relevance

on a deeper level. The Church loses credibility not because it insists on teaching “outmoded” doctrines but because it lacks the courage to continue teaching what it knows to be true.⁵

Yet, the Church has lost the courage to teach the truth; it has become like a frightened child, too timid to confront the bully, or afraid the truth might do damage to the sensitivities of a snowflake. Teachings (Tradition), first taught by Jesus Christ then passed on to the Apostles and their successors, having stood true for more than two millennia, weathered countless storms of heresy and persecution, are now considered suspect, outdated, and irrelevant to a secular, godless culture. Tradition, in the Catholic sense, has since the beginning been a pillar of the Catholic faith. But, Tradition, like history, has been deemed unhealthy to dwell upon with any degree of seriousness.

Tradition is a loaded word. It means that which has been handed over. It is used to describe everything from the trivial to the transcendent, from a secret family recipe to the Nicene Creed, from turkey on Thanksgiving to the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In this sense, it ranges from the mere human preferences to something like the Holy Writ of God, the Sacred Scriptures.⁶

G. K. Chesterton wrote, “Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.” This seems to me not only true but strongly suggestive of a common hubris afflicting ourselves whenever we have a sudden uncontrollable urge to consider anything at all remotely related to

the past, whether it be history or tradition.

I’ve been pondering this for some time from a couple of different perspectives. First of all, in the present political maelstrom, when all seems uncertain and insecure, where the old definitions are dissolving and new alliances are being forged, one looks for a different kind of democracy. The “democracy of the dead.”

In other words, when we value tradition we value what has stood the test of time. We value what our ancestors also believed stood the test of time. This is one of the main reasons why I am Catholic today—because I went to England looking for a historic Church. The Church that was founded not 50 years ago, but 500 years ago. That quest led me further east from England to France, and from France to Italy and from Italy to Israel—and wherever I went I found a Church that was not just 500 years old, but 2,000 years old. And that Church reached back not only to its roots in the Roman Empire, but to its foundation on the apostles and prophets who were God’s people the Hebrews—and *their* tradition stretched back another 2,000 years.

I wanted to be part of that living tradition and to plant my roots deep. That’s why I am not only a Catholic, but a Catholic who treasures the traditions of the Church. The traditions I treasure are the Sacred Scriptures, the Sacred Liturgy, the timeless teaching of the Church in all its aspects and the lives of the saints—in which we see the traditions of the Church enfolded in history. Pope Benedict XVI said, “Scripture can only be interpreted in the lives of the saints.” It is also true that the teachings of the Church in both morals and doctrine can only really be seen in their full glory in the lives of the

saints.

Trying to live this tradition in modern America is not easy. One is besieged by a host of demonic “ism’s”—materialism, relativism, scientism, sentimentalism, utilitarianism and more. The Church herself is swamped by the onslaught. So I do what I can to pray the tradition, live the tradition and worship in the tradition.⁷

Father Dwight Longenecker, a frequent contributor to the National Catholic Register, has an interesting journey to the Catholic Church and the priesthood. Raised in an Evangelical home in Pennsylvania, he went on to graduate from Bob Jones University with a degree in Speech and English, then studied theology at Oxford University. He eventually was ordained an Anglican priest and served as a curate, a school chaplain in Cambridge and a country parson on the Isle of Wight. In 1995 he and his family were received into the Catholic Church and in 2006 they returned to the USA where he was ordained a Catholic priest. He currently is the Pastor of Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church in Greenville, South Carolina.

What strikes me the most is the importance Tradition of the Catholic Church was in drawing Fr. Longenecker to the Catholic faith. Yet, even among the Catholic hierarchy, religious, and laity there continues to be a growing antipathy to its importance and purpose. As another priest recently wrote:

Sober tradition recognizes the eschatological dimension of worship. As I have been preaching and writing for years, we build our churches

and fill them with beauty, we develop our worship and participate in it because we are all going to die. Awareness of the Four Last Things pulses within every word and gesture, ...

Liturgical worship, properly understood and properly activated, keeps the participant in a constant tension between the reality of Christ’s definitive, once for all time, defeat of death and the reality that, even though we belong wholly to Him in His mystical Body, we still have to die.

By our sacred liturgical worship we fulfill our obligations to God by the virtue of religion and we confront the fact of our impending death. We go to Mass because of love of God to whom we owe everything. We go to Mass because we are going to die.⁸

It is an undeniable fact that no one who comes into this world will escape the inevitable exit from it. That we will eventually die is a harsh reality, that we will live on for eternity is God’s truth, where we will spend eternity is for each of us to determine.

Until next week, God bless you.

1. James Hitchcock, *“Catholicism and Modernity: Confrontation or Capitulation,”*. (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 8-10.
2. Fr. J. M. Bampton, S. J. *Modernism and Modern Thought* (London and Edinbrugh: Sands & Company, 1913), p. 34.
3. Blog post, “Vatican I—Condemnation of Agnosticism and Vital Immanence”, May 27, 2013, foretasteofwisdom.blogspot.com/2013/05/vatican-i-condemnation-of-agnosticism.html.
4. Hitchcock, *“Catholicism and Modernity”*, p. 11.
5. Hitchcock, *“Catholicism and Modernity”*, pp. 12-13.
6. James Kushiner, *“Tradition Is Something We Can’t Live Without”*, Friday Reflection for March 15, 2019, The Fellowship of St. James.
7. Fr. Dwight Longenecker, *“Tradition is the Democracy of the Dead”*, posted 3/15/19 for the National Catholic Register.
8. Fr. John Zuhlsdorf, *Mass and Triumphalism*, March 10, 2019.

Deacon’s Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

Thoughtful Theism

Fr. Andrew Younan

Emmaus Road Publishing
2017, 200 pages.

To Change the Church

Ross Gregory Douthat

Simon & Schuster
2018, 256 pages.

Mere Christianity

C. S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd.
1952, 228 pages.

PERIODICALS

First Things

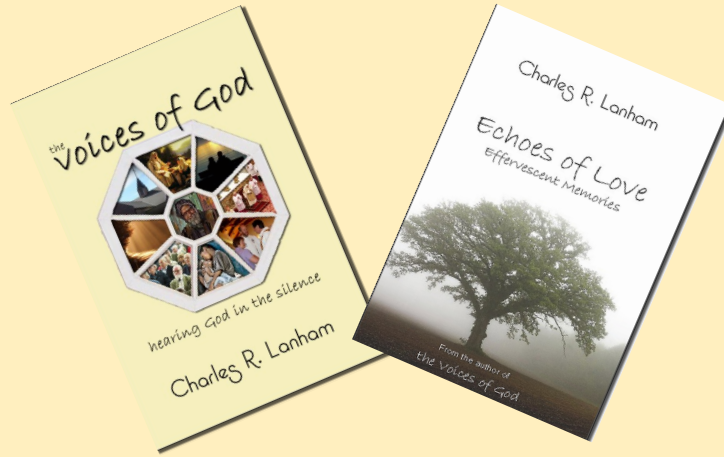
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and is currently writing his third book **Without God: Finding God in a Godless World**.

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