

*"An Unfinished Council* is a hopeful book by one of the church's foremost interpreters of Vatican II. Avoiding simplistic sound-bites and worn-out clichés, Gaillardetz offers a fresh account of the council, ready for the new life breathed into the church by Pope Francis. This is a mature and magnanimous vision that, like Francis, reminds us that we all have a role to play in the ongoing reform and renewal of the church. Everyone—from the beginning undergraduate to the seasoned pastor—can learn something from Gaillardetz."

—Edward P. Hahnenberg, PhD

Author of *Theology for Ministry: An Introduction for Lay Ministers*

"Coming from one of the eminent ecclesialogists in the Catholic Church today, this book is a substantial contribution to the literature on Vatican II and, indeed, takes it on a new trajectory. Using his image of 'seven pillars,' Gaillardetz succinctly captures the structure of a Vatican II church. With his perceptive analysis of the council's implicit vision of 'non-competitive' ecclesial relationships in a church that is 'magnanimous' and 'humble,' Gaillardetz has given us a compelling account of the work that still needs to be done, if the vision of Vatican II is to be realized. For anyone wanting keen insight into the reform agenda of the council, and its implications for today, *An Unfinished Council* provides an inspiring guide."

—Ormond Rush

Australian Catholic University

"In *An Unfinished Council*, Richard R. Gaillardetz extends a compelling invitation to the Roman Catholic Church to take the next steps in its faithful pilgrimage. Beginning with an exploration of the theological principles and historical realities operative before, during, and after Vatican II, Gaillardetz proceeds to highlight humility and magnanimity as essential ecclesial virtues that develop authentic self-understanding and create collaboration rather than competition. By examining Pope Francis's reception of Vatican II, Gaillardetz encourages his readers to be architects of the church's communion and mission who engage the periphery through listening and subsidiarity. *An Unfinished Council* is an accessible, insightful, and timely call for the church to engage today in ongoing reform through critical reception of the past and with hope for the future."

—Amanda C. Osheim

Assistant Professor of Practical Theology

Loras College

“Gaillardetz is a master builder at the site of a new church under construction. Here he probes and assesses with precision the lingering remnants of obsolete pre-Vatican II church structures and practices. And with inspiring resolve and creativity he contributes to a synthetic interpretation of Vatican II’s ecclesiological achievement. His blueprint accentuates the power of the Spirit in confronting the misuse of hierarchic power, while creating a new noncompetitive ordering of relationships in the church, motivated by magnanimity and humility.”

—Bradford Hinze  
Fordham University

“*An Unfinished Council* is an important synthesis of the meaning of Vatican II for the contemporary church, especially for the broad ideological spectrum of Catholic political engagement. It demonstrates how to resist the polarizing ideological divides facing Catholicism in America today.”

—Massimo Faggioli  
Director, Institute for Catholicism and Citizenship  
University of St. Thomas

“The Second Vatican Council awakened Catholic consciousness to the time-conditioned nature of the church as a human community led through history toward its final fulfillment by the dynamic of God’s Spirit. As such, it will always be an unfinished building project. Building on this metaphor, Richard R. Gaillardetz invites us to consider the unfinished business of receiving the council’s central insights, developing a synthetic reading of its teaching apt to inform the pastoral life and missional witness of Catholics in today’s world. He argues convincingly that Pope Francis presents Catholics with a fuller integration of Vatican II’s enduring significance for our time, especially in his holistic vision of the church as a community of missionary disciples, confidently assuming responsibility for humble self-examination, ongoing renewal and reform, dialogical engagement within the church and with others, proclaiming the mercy and justice of God. Superbly written, a balanced, creative, and insightful reading of the challenges and opportunities facing contemporary Catholicism.”

—Catherine E. Clifford  
Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology  
Saint Paul University, Ottawa

# **An Unfinished Council**

*Vatican II, Pope Francis, and  
the Renewal of Catholicism*

Richard R. Gaillardetz



A Michael Glazier Book

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*To Robert Rivers, CSP,  
who first introduced me to the Second Vatican Council*



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## Preface

The Second Vatican Council was an event of unparalleled significance in the history of modern Catholicism. One has to go back to the Protestant Reformation to find an event that matches Vatican II's impact on Roman Catholicism. In December 2015 the Catholic Church celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the close of that groundbreaking council. Yet for all its historic importance, many millennial Catholics have greeted the council's anniversary with one big ecclesial yawn. Understandably, young Catholics mostly take for granted the council's most important achievements because those achievements constitute, in many ways, the only church reality they have known. Older Catholics are generally more aware of the changes introduced at the council. Yet even as they acknowledge conciliar contributions like the liturgical reform, a more prominent role for the laity and a more positive spirit of dialogue with other Christian traditions and world religions, they often fail to grasp the emerging theological vision that informed those developments.

Among various Catholic elites—clergy, lay ministers, church activists, theologians, and church commentators—the celebration of this anniversary has been more complex. Some have cautiously acknowledged the council's contributions but not without considerable handwringing regarding its proper interpretation. They worry that there has been insufficient appreciation for the substantial continuity between the council and what came before. They acknowledge valid theological developments but insist that the council effected no change at the level of church doctrine. For such Catholics, the council's primary contribution was limited to its change in pastoral tone and a circumscribed empowerment of the laity, in the secular order. Still many others, including a good number old enough to appreciate the council's importance, struggle between two impulses: gratitude

for the gift of the council and discouragement at the extent to which important conciliar teachings have yet to be fully implemented. They are exasperated, in short, with the council's failed promise. If their disappointment is warranted, and to some extent I believe it is, where does one locate the origins of that failure?

To begin with, the council suffered the misfortune of having been convened right as the Western world underwent a cultural cataclysm of sorts in the 1960s and 1970s. Widespread social unrest brought about by the Cuban missile crisis, unruly student protests, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the assassination of one American president, the scandal-induced resignation of another, and, at least in the United States, a wildly unpopular war—all contributed to a cultural climate that made it difficult to distinguish legitimate calls for church reform from the larger *zeitgeist* of social unrest.

In hindsight, there may also have been a certain naïveté regarding the challenges the church faced in producing a structural implementation of the council's reformist vision. For example, the revised 1984 *Code of Canon Law* represented a major effort to give juridical form to the council's teaching. Yet in spite of the revised code's slavish quotation of the council documents, it too often failed to grasp the council's overarching theological vision. Hervé Legrand writes:

*Vatican II paid scant attention to the canonical dimension of the reforms it sought to introduce.* Of all the Council documents, only the Constitution on the Liturgy concerned itself with guaranteeing its enactment, setting out forty-nine(!) normative prescriptions. After this, *Christus Dominus* was virtually the only document to use this method, though it set out wishes rather than norms.<sup>1</sup>

The task of postconciliar reform was handed over to the Roman Curia for implementation. In the area of the liturgy, a bold experiment at postconciliar reform was undertaken with the creation of the Consilium, a special commission of bishops and liturgical experts. This remarkable commission, headed by Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro of Bologna and driven by the indefatigable liturgical scholar Anni-

<sup>1</sup> Hervé Legrand, "Forty Years Later: What Has Become of the Ecclesiological Reforms Envisaged by Vatican II?," in *Concilium: Vatican II: A Forgotten Future*, ed. Alberto Melloni and Christoph Theobald, no. 4 (2005): 57–72, at 57; emphasis in original.

bale Bugnini, undertook the monumental task of revising the entire corpus of liturgical books and rituals, culminating in the Missal of Pope Paul VI. The commission lasted from 1964 to 1969; its unusual independence from the Curia and its reputation for collaboration and a high level of liturgical scholarship allowed it to provide a far-reaching implementation of the council's liturgical vision. Yet there were obvious limits to its work, given its chronological proximity to the council. In 1969 its mission was taken over by the Congregation of Divine Worship, and while that congregation ably continued the liturgical reform over the next five years, it inevitably exerted what Piero Marini referred to as a "curialization" of the liturgical reform.<sup>2</sup> This became even more pronounced some six years later when, in 1975, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments were combined into one curial office. Crimped postconciliar implementation was even more pronounced in other areas. The curialization of reform basically meant asking a bureaucracy with a native inclination to preserve the *status quo* to take responsibility for reforming itself!

Yet another difficulty, and the one that will occupy most of our attention in this volume, concerns the ongoing need for more synthetic theological interpretations of the council's teaching and enduring significance. The council provided no unified and comprehensive ecclesiology. Instead, what we find in the council documents are important theological and pastoral trajectories for development across a range of issues. Given how councils work, this is understandable, but the consequence was that it has been too easy to isolate particular council teachings in a way that minimizes the broader conciliar impulse for meaningful church reform. So, for example, it has been too easy to highlight the council's teaching on the laity but without linking it to the council's teaching on the capacity of all the baptized to actively appropriate God's Word in their lives (the council's teaching on the *sensus fidei*). What has too often resulted is a celebration

<sup>2</sup> Piero Marini, *A Challenging Reform: Realizing the Vision of the Liturgical Renewal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 153. See also Rita Ferrone, *Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium, Rediscovering Vatican II Series* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 61.

of lay volunteerism that still excludes the laity from contributing substantively to church decision making.

Over the past five decades, we have seen the publication of many helpful commentaries on the conciliar texts. Countless other books and articles have engaged in a focused exegesis of controverted passages and formulations found in the conciliar texts. The distinguished French Canadian expert in the study of Vatican II, Gilles Routhier, notes both the contributions and limits of these more focused studies:

Necessary and legitimate though this analytic method is, it tends, if it is not accompanied by a more synthetic method, to dismember the conciliar corpus by reducing it to so many instructions on specific questions. It tends to concentrate on particular, isolated pronouncements, thereby preventing a grasp of Vatican II as a coherent whole or a unified ensemble and reducing it to an aggregate of specific teachings. In effect, it is possible to gloss on and to comment *ad infinitum* on the teachings of the council—on *subsistit in*, for example, or the hierarchy of truths—without ever arriving at a grasp of the council's central intuitions that should still be nourishing us today.<sup>3</sup>

Any synthetic study of the council must carefully attend to the council texts, read in the light of their textual history, their intra/inter-textual contexts, and their postconciliar reception.<sup>4</sup> But a synthetic study will also, as Routhier notes, consider the distinctive theological method that the council employed, its characteristic way of addressing issues and framing questions that needed to be explored. It will look for seminal ideas, larger patterns, and architectonic structures that informed the council's deliberations.<sup>5</sup>

This volume marks my own preliminary contribution to a more synthetic interpretation of the council. I do not claim to offer an exhaustive and comprehensive interpretation of the council's teaching; such a project, I suspect, is no longer within the capacity of a

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Routhier, "Vatican II: Relevance and Future," *Theological Studies* 74 (September 2013): 537–54, at 540.

<sup>4</sup> For a fruitful development of this threefold hermeneutical strategy see Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Routhier, "Vatican II: Relevance and Future," 541.

single theologian. Some of what the council taught will have to be given only cursory consideration here. Nevertheless, my goal in this volume is to contribute to the theological task of drawing together the council's many contributions into a more coherent theological vision of the church, one capable of underwriting a comprehensive program of ecclesial reform and renewal.

This project will be structured around a useful metaphor for the council once offered by the distinguished German theologian Hermann Pottmeyer. At the conclusion of a volume he wrote on the papacy, Pottmeyer referred to Vatican II as "an unfinished building site," an ecclesiological project still waiting completion.<sup>6</sup> He recalled the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in the sixteenth century. The original basilica had been built during the Constantinian era and was, by the sixteenth century, rather dilapidated. Over much of the sixteenth century, a series of popes sponsored the design and construction of a new basilica, one more adequate to the needs of the church. The work began on the construction of a new basilica, however, even as portions of the older Constantinian basilica were left standing. The remains of the older basilica would not be completely removed until almost a century after the new building project had begun. Pottmeyer saw in this sixteenth-century tableau an extended metaphor for the work of the council. It too was responding to an outdated ecclesial form and its work represented the partial construction of an alternative ecclesial form more adequate to the needs of the time. Following Pottmeyer's intuition, I contend that Vatican II can be imagined as an ecclesiological building project concerned with constructing a new "basilica," that is, a renewed vision for the church. Yet this project was undertaken in the shadow of a still imposing but largely antiquated ecclesial "structure."

The metaphor helps explain the title of this volume, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism*. It should go without saying that I go beyond Pottmeyer's more modest employment of the metaphor and any failures that accompany this effort should be placed at my feet and not his. The building metaphor is helpful, in my view, because it brings into relief the necessary

<sup>6</sup> Hermann J. Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I & II* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 110.

historical contextualization of the council. It acknowledges that the pope's decision to call the council was born out of a sober assessment of the state of the Catholic Church at that time. The pope and many other church leaders and theologians had come to feel the burdensome strain of striving to fulfill the church's mission within a theological, sacramental, and pastoral form that in many instances was no longer adequate to the demands of that mission. At the same time, the metaphor allows us to appreciate the extent to which the council's response represented the beginning of a new theological, sacramental, and pastoral form (the beginnings of the new "basilica"), albeit a form that could not be completed. According to Pottmeyer, the council was able to establish the "pillars" for a new structure but could not provide a "dome" that would bring those pillars into an architectural unity. Hence Vatican II has remained an unfinished project.

We must be careful to recognize the limits and dangers that go with employing extended metaphors of this kind. First of all, the building metaphor is inherently static, whereas the reality it wishes to illuminate, the Catholic Church and its great tradition, is a living, dynamic reality. Second, the metaphor foregrounds the inadequacies of the preconciliar "form" of the Catholic Church and the council's bold call for reform and renewal. As a consequence, it privileges the novelty of the council, somewhat at the expense of the council's continuity with past ecclesial forms. By emphasizing change over continuity, the metaphor is at least susceptible to the criticism of Pope Benedict XVI, who famously counterposed two different ways of interpreting Vatican II.<sup>7</sup> First, he criticized the emergence of a "hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture" that posited a radical discontinuity between Vatican II and the earlier Catholic tradition. He then proposed, not a hermeneutics of continuity, as one might expect, but a "hermeneutics of reform," an interpretive strategy that acknowledges in the council's teaching a "novelty in continuity." He recognized that there was genuine novelty in the council's teaching, but a novelty that deepened fidelity with the great tradition of the church.

<sup>7</sup> He offered this hermeneutical analysis in a pre-Christmas address given on December 22, 2005. The text can be found online at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html).

The pope was surely right to insist that a formal and comprehensive rendering of the council's relationship to the great tradition must seek a balanced consideration of elements of both continuity and change.<sup>8</sup> The council's teaching did far more than merely salvage select elements from an antiquated ecclesial form; it drew considerably from a rich two thousand-year heritage, but often bringing into the foreground of church reflection elements from that heritage that had been neglected or minimized in the older form.

As Pope John XXIII himself noted in his opening address at the council, however, there was really no need to call for an ecumenical council if such a council were to do no more than repeat what has always been taught. Pope John convoked Vatican II in order to address pressing challenges in both the church and the world. It was in this sense that Vatican II was to be a "pastoral" council. The council bishops made clear choices to attend to certain questions and issues at the expense of others. The council deliberations constituted a practical assessment of the state of the church at that time and a determination to bring about a necessary reform and renewal. If, then, our efforts at a constructive and synthetic interpretation of the council are to be in keeping with the pastoral orientation of the council itself, a measured emphasis on change over continuity may be warranted. Granting these limits, I contend that the building metaphor, if used judiciously, remains useful as a way of illuminating the fundamental orientation and genuine contributions of the council.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief consideration of the key features of the ancient "basilica," what I will refer to as the preconciliar, "hierocratic" form of the church. It is this form, the result of centuries of development, which shaped Catholic identity for good and for ill in the early twentieth century. The dramatic advance of biblical and historical studies that flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allowed Catholics to appreciate that this hierocratic form was just that, a form and not *the* form of the church. The emerging historical consciousness that permeated the intellectual life of Roman Catholicism during that period made possible a thoroughgoing assessment and critique of the hierocratic form.

<sup>8</sup> An apt example of such a project would be Cardinal Walter Kasper's *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality, and Mission* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Chapter 2 will consider the council as an “event” that itself manifested a new way of being church.<sup>9</sup> The story of the council is, in a sense, the story of the church in microcosm. It is the story of the church in the process of what Joseph Komonchak referred to as the church’s “self-constitution.”<sup>10</sup> The story of the council is, then, the story of the church seeking a renewed fidelity to the great tradition precisely by being church in a new way. Chapter 3 follows upon this consideration of the council as event by returning to the building metaphor to present a “wide-angle lens” view of the council’s principal contributions toward a new ecclesial self-understanding. Here we will encounter a number of important conciliar developments that lacked, however, a unifying theological narrative.

Chapters 4 and 5 will begin the project of constructing a synthetic interpretation of the council’s ecclesiological achievement. Chapter 4 considers council teaching with regard to the fundamental orientation of the church, an orientation governed by the ecclesial virtue of humility. Chapter 5 offers a complementary reading of council teaching, but now attending to ecclesial dynamics, that is, an exploration of how various components or spheres of ecclesial life are called to interact. If the organizing principle of chapter 4 was the virtue of humility, the organizing principle of chapter 5 is the council’s recovery of pneumatology, a theology of the Holy Spirit that enables a shift from a competitive to a noncompetitive account of ecclesial dynamics. Chapter 6 considers the extent to which the pontificate of Pope Francis is offering a fresh reception of the teaching of the council that represents, in its own way, yet another effort at a more

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Komonchak and John O’Malley have each, in distinct ways, emphasized the way in which Vatican II must be appreciated, not only for the authoritative teaching evident in the sixteen documents it promulgated, but also as an ecclesial “event” that constituted a decisive “rupture” with the ordinary course of church life. See Joseph Komonchak, “Vatican II as ‘Event,’” Fourth Annual De Lubac Lecture, February 11, 1999 (privately published by the Department of Theological Studies and the Office of University Mission and Ministry, St. Louis University, St. Louis, 1999); John W. O’Malley, “Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 3–33.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Komonchak, “The Significance of Vatican II for Ecclesiology,” in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 2000), 70.



synthetic interpretation of the council's teaching. In conclusion, chapter 7 offers some reflections on the possible direction of a program for reform and renewal consonant with the council's implicit ecclesiological vision.

This volume includes both newly developed material and a thorough reworking of material from essays of mine that originally appeared elsewhere. These include: "Conversation Starters: Dialogue and Deliberation during Vatican II," *America* (February 13, 2012): 14–18; "We Have the Pillars, but the Building Is Still Unfinished," in *A Church Reborn: Second Vatican Council, 1962–1965*, special edition of the *National Catholic Reporter* (October 11, 2012): 48–50; "Engaging Magisterial Activism Today," *Horizons* 39, no. 2 (2012): 230–51; "Building on Vatican II: Setting the Agenda for the Church of the 21st Century," *Theoforum* 44 (2013): 67–90; "Vatican II's Noncompetitive Theology of the Church," *Louvain Studies* 37 (2013): 3–27; "The 'Francis Moment': A New Kairos for Catholic Ecclesiology," *CTSA Proceedings* 69 (2014): 63–80; "Vatican II and the Humility of the Church," in *The Legacy of Vatican II*, edited by Massimo Faggioli and Andrea Vicini (New York: Paulist Press, 2015); "Power and Authority in the Church: Emerging Issues," in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, edited by Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

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My "true companion," Diana, has walked with me for almost three decades and her support has sustained me in ways too deep and textured to be adequately expressed in these brief acknowledgments. Our four sons (Greg, Brian, David, and Andrew) are now adults; they remain a source of boundless pride. The joy they give me has fueled so much of my intellectual passion.

In the fall of 1977, as a nineteen-year-old sophomore attending the University of Texas, I walked into the Catholic Student Center that

was adjacent to the campus. Raised in a Catholic family, I had drifted away from the practice of Catholicism during my first year of college and joined a more fundamentalist, evangelical group. I soon became disturbed, however, by the anti-intellectualism of that brand of Evangelicalism. Still dissatisfied with the tepid Catholicism of my youth, I nevertheless decided to visit the Catholic Student Center. There I met a young Paulist priest on the staff named Fr. Robert Rivers, CSP, who invited me to take a course he was teaching on modern biblical scholarship in the Catholic tradition. That course led to a series of adult education classes and numerous reading suggestions that introduced me to the capacious breadth and depth of the Catholic tradition and the beguiling promise of the Second Vatican Council. Over the next four decades, Bob has remained a dear friend, spiritual director, mentor, and golf partner. It is with immense gratitude that I dedicate these modest reflections to him.

# 1

## **The Council in Context** Responding to the Hierocratic Form of the Church

Enthusiastic support for the reformist program of Vatican II can lead to an unnecessary denigration of the state of Catholicism on the eve of the council. The Catholic Church before the council certainly continued to enrich the lives of many believers. The Catholic faith was still handed on in parishes and schools, and the sacraments were celebrated. Countless Catholics were led by God's grace and the practice of their faith to a life of holiness. Many Catholics had a robust sense of their own religious identity; being Catholic offered a distinctive way of being in the world. Indeed, Catholics dwelled in an enchanted world sustained by a sensual religious imagination. Sacramentals, stained-glass windows, statuary, and a plethora of devotional practices further enriched this religious imagination. The clergy were viewed as exemplars of holiness, sacramental "dispensers," and keepers of ecclesiastical order and stability. The papacy provided a strong symbol of Catholic identity and church unity.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as we shall see, not all was well with the church.

<sup>1</sup> For a series of helpful "snapshots" of Catholic life, at least here in the United States, in the decades before the council, see Thomas H. Groome and Michael J. Daley, eds., *Reclaiming Catholicism: Treasures Old and New* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

## 2 *An Unfinished Council*

In truth, the history of Catholicism has seen many different church “forms,” each corresponding more or less to the historical context and pastoral challenges of a given age. Ordinary believers prayed, exercised the works of mercy, and generally practiced their faith in distinctive and characteristic ways just as church leaders exercised their particular ministries according to patterns shaped by divine revelation, cultural assumptions, and the pragmatic needs of the time. As but one example from the early church, the office of the priest had its origins in the second-century ministry of the presbyter who functioned primarily as an elder-counselor and exercised little in the way of sacramental ministry. As Christianity grew in certain urban areas, however, it was no longer possible for all the Christians of a city to gather at one place of worship under the presidency of their bishop. Satellite communities sprouted and bishops began delegating to their presbyters the responsibility of presiding at the Eucharist for these communities.

As each epoch succeeded the next, certain ecclesiastical structures, thought forms, and customary expressions of the church’s self-understanding were carried forward. Some endured because they had proven to be of lasting value. Others, however, maintained a position of prominence long after the circumstances that led to their development had passed away. Catholic Christians recognize a providential character in many of these developments, but this cannot blind us to the relative contingency of particular ecclesial structures (e.g., the gradual emergence of the College of Cardinals). The church has the task, in every age, to discern which elements of the church’s practice and self-understanding are enduring and providential and which are not.

Church history must not be reduced to a story of unrelieved devolution from some more ancient and presumably more pure vision of the church. Change and development are inevitable in a church that is truly alive. If we believe the Spirit continues to abide and influence the church, then we must resist imagining that only the form in which the church appeared in the first centuries represents the church willed by Christ and his Spirit. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests, we should see the life and structure of the early church more as a “prototype” from which all future forms of the

church must be linked, rather than as an “archetype” upon which all other ecclesial forms must be modeled.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of two millennia, new theological schools emerged; religious orders were created and lay initiatives undertaken. Faith and culture interacted in particular contexts. Few Christians bothered to think in an explicitly theological way about the church, at least in the sense of engaging in formal and self-critical reflection on the nature and mission of the church. Operative ecclesologies were simply enacted in concrete sets of communal structures and practices, some of which had long endured and others which emerged in response to changing contexts.

Over the course of the second millennium, through a succession of ecclesial epochs, a series of ecclesial forms followed one upon the other. There are any number of ways to parse these historical developments. Staf Hellemans describes three successive forms that emerged over the last five hundred years.<sup>3</sup> The first was the emergence of “early modern Catholicism” which, beginning in the sixteenth century, responded to the Protestant Reformation, the rise of modern science, and the beginning of the Enlightenment. The second form, which developed in the wake of the French Revolution, he describes as “ultramontane mass Catholicism.” It is during this period that Catholicism emerges as a distinct counter-society and looks to the papacy as a unifying force. Papal centralization moved from rhetoric to reality as bishops are brought more fully under the ambit of papal authority. Hellemans also sees in this period an unprecedented socialization of the larger Catholic population into a particular account of Catholic identity, a socialization made possible by the employment of modern media and the widespread expansion of an ambitious Catholic educational system.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Hermeneutics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 10–14.

<sup>3</sup> Staf Hellemans, “Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West,” in *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity: Transformation, Visions, Tensions*, ed. Staf Hellemans and Jozef Wissink (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2012), 19–50.

The ecclesial form that dominated the Catholic landscape in the early twentieth century was in fact sustained by structures, ecclesial habits, and thought forms that originated in various periods of church history. In this volume, I refer to this as the “hierocratic form” of the church. I am borrowing the term from the great Dominican theologian Yves Congar, who so perceptively limned the rise of a “hierocratic ecclesiology” beginning in the eleventh century.<sup>4</sup> Recalling Pottmeyer’s extended metaphor, this hierocratic form corresponds to the Constantinian basilica of St. Peter’s. It had long served the church well but had eventually become dilapidated and was widely acknowledged as no longer adequate to the needs of the church of that time. This form was not without its strengths. It provided an unambiguous sense of distinctive Catholic identity and institutional structures that had proven extraordinarily successful in preserving the church’s unity through a program of comprehensive ecclesiastical uniformity.

In this chapter I wish to outline the key features of the hierocratic form that dominated the Catholic landscape on the eve of Vatican II. Five basic “pillars” supported this hierocratic form.<sup>5</sup> Each pillar itself has a long history and only select moments in those histories can be noted here. These pillars are: (1) a propositional theology of divine revelation, (2) a papo-centric church leadership structure, (3) a sacral priesthood, (4) a mechanistic theology of grace and the sacraments, and (5) a confrontational attitude toward the world.

## I. A Propositional Theology of Revelation

Christians do not believe that we are left here on our own to seek out some distant and inscrutable divine reality. Rather, we believe that

<sup>4</sup> Yves Congar, *L’Église de Saint Augustin à l’époque moderne* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 224–30.

<sup>5</sup> Ghislain Lafont has something very similar in mind to this hierocratic form of the church in his description of what he called the “Gregorian form of the church.” See Ghislain Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church: Structured Communion in the Spirit* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 37–64. The first three of these “pillars” correspond loosely to Lafont’s characterization of the Gregorian form; the last two represent my own expanded characterization of the hierocratic ecclesiology dominant on the eve of the council.

God wishes to disclose to us God's very self as the infinite horizon and necessary foundation for all loving and life-giving relationship. The biblical testimony recounts this event of divine communication through the mediation of God's activity on behalf of the people of Israel and the teaching of the prophets. This divine self-disclosure, early Christians believed, had achieved its unsurpassable goal in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and his decisive proclamation of the in-breaking of God's shalom into history. Divine truth was revealed in its most basic modality, not in a written text but in a person. This was the heart of a Christian theology of revelation and for centuries there was relatively little development beyond these basic convictions.

Only after some centuries, and under the influence of an overwhelmingly Platonic intellectual milieu, did a theology of revelation emerge that presented divine Truth as that which supernaturally illuminated the human intellect through faith. Under the influence of an extraordinary figure from the fifth or sixth centuries known simply as Pseudo-Dionysius, Christian Neoplatonism reconfigured the theology of divine revelation as a reality received from the upper spiritual realm and conveyed to the lower created realms of the cosmos. Although Pseudo-Dionysius first influenced Eastern Christianity, over the centuries his thought would be brought to the West and in the thirteenth century it began to shape Western ecclesiology. Divine revelation was presented as a reality given to the hierarchy and then handed on to the lay faithful through the agency of church officeholders. We might describe this as a kind of spiritual "trickle-down theory."<sup>6</sup> Divine Truth was understood as mediated in a linguistic or propositional form as a set of discrete "truths." In this view, supernatural revelation was concerned primarily with the transmission of conceptual knowledge and was conceived on the analogy of human speech. According to Ghislain Lafont, this theology assumed "a quasi-identity of revealed truth and the formulas expressing the truth."<sup>7</sup> This approach was further stimulated in the

<sup>6</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 247.

<sup>7</sup> Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church*, 39. Decades earlier, Joseph Ratzinger made a similar observation in his commentary on *Dei Verbum*. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," in *Commentary on the*

late Middle Ages by an excessive confidence in the capacity of syllogistic logic to generate new dogmatic propositions. Nevertheless, the church of the Middle Ages also gave ample room for wide-ranging theological debate regarding the content of divine revelation, the proper interpretation of Scripture, and the status of apparent contradictions within Scripture and tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Although the origins of this propositional model can be traced back to the Middle Ages, it would receive much fuller development with the rise of a brand of theology known as neoscholasticism in the hundred years or so prior to Vatican II.<sup>9</sup> Church officeholders, the pope and bishops who came to constitute “the magisterium,” would play a distinctive and virtually exclusive role in authoritatively proposing these dogmatic propositions for belief. Since not all of the dogmatic propositions offered by the church as divinely revealed could be found in Scripture, this view led some to assert the existence of two distinct sources of revelation: Scripture and tradition.<sup>10</sup> In this view, while certain propositional truths were explicitly articulated in Scripture, others could only be found in tradition. This view would be reinforced by the promulgation of the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Bodily Assumption of Mary, since both had few if any biblical warrants.

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*Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 190–91.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Christopher Levy, *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Avery Dulles considers this approach to revelation as one of several different “models of revelation.” In this context a given model suggests “a possible and consistent way of thinking about a certain set of problems.” *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 31–32. Dulles refers to what I have called the propositional model as “revelation as doctrine.” For his initial treatment of this model see *Models of Revelation*, 36–52.

<sup>10</sup> The Council of Trent had flirted with a similar (though not identical) position centuries earlier. In one of its decrees, Trent proposed that divine truths were contained “partly” in the “written books” and “partly” in unwritten traditions. The final text, however, was changed to read that truth was found “both in the written books and in unwritten traditions.” The first formulation suggested that these were two distinct sources of divine truth, yet the final formulation was at least open to the interpretation that there were not different *sources* of truth at all but only different *modes of expression*.



This emphasis on revelation in the form of discrete doctrinal statements taught authoritatively by the magisterium had the merit of making the Christian faith readily intelligible; it offered a clarity regarding the content of Christian belief and provided ready answers to Catholics who needed to defend their faith against the attacks of non-Catholics. This theology, however, was also prone to reducing revelation to a set of propositional truths about God, forgetting almost entirely the ancient conviction that divine revelation has come to us first and primarily as an offer to saving communion in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Over the centuries, this propositional reduction of revelation gradually shaped conceptions of the role of the people of God in the handing on and reception of the faith of the church. If revelation is passively received from above through the exclusive mediation of official teaching authorities, then the reception of that revelation by the faithful will necessarily be passive and obediential, adding nothing to what has been handed down.

As we shall see, during the first session of Vatican II, the bishops were presented with a draft document on divine revelation that presupposed much of this propositional model.<sup>12</sup> In fact it was titled "On the Sources of Revelation." It proposed problematic understandings of the inspiration of the biblical authors and the nature of the assistance of the Holy Spirit given to the church hierarchy. In considerations of biblical authorship, for example, the draft text downplayed the human element and considered the biblical authors as little more than passive conduits of divine truth.

## II. A Papo-Centric Church Leadership Structure

A robust papo-centrism represents the second "pillar" in this hierocratic form. Over the first three centuries, we can identify a quickly emerging conviction that the church of Rome, a church associated

<sup>11</sup> For examples of this model of revelation see Christian Pesch, *Praelectiones dogmaticae*, 5th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1915), and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Revelatione per Ecclesiam catholicam proposita*, 4th ed. (Rome: Ferrari, 1945).

<sup>12</sup> Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," 155–67.

with not one but two great apostles, Sts. Peter and Paul, had a particular claim on having received the apostolic teaching and having remained faithful to that teaching. The distinctive primacy thereby attributed to the church of Rome would eventually be extended to its bishop, and by the fourth century the authority of the Bishop of Rome was further underwritten by appeals to Matthew 16 and the authority that Christ had granted to St. Peter.

Catholicism affirms the necessary role of a Petrine ministry, yet we must acknowledge the relatively marginal role of the papacy in the life of the church for much of the first millennium. For the first thousand years of Christianity, most Christians would never have seen the pope, never have read anything that he had said or written, and, indeed, probably could not have named him. Even bishops—who were, along with the nobility, the more direct objects of papal initiatives—experienced a remarkable degree of *de facto* autonomy. Popes did not appoint bishops (except for those dioceses that were suburbicarian sees surrounding Rome). They generally did not convene, preside over, or set the agenda for ecumenical councils. They did not canonize saints; they did not write encyclicals; they did not call bishops to Rome for regular *ad limina* visits; they were never referred to as “sovereign pontiff”; and the titles “pope” and “vicar of Christ” were used in reference not only to them but also to other bishops and even emperors. In short, throughout the first thousand years of the church, it would simply have been false to say that popes “ran the church.” Church historian John O’Malley writes:

In the early Middle Ages (and well beyond) the popes’ principal duty, many believed, was to guard the tombs of the Apostles and officiate at the solemn liturgies of the great basilicas. In that period, although some of the popes of course had a broad vision of their responsibilities and dealt about weighty matters with the leaders of society, for the most part they behaved as essentially local figures, intent on local issues.<sup>13</sup>

This would all change in the eleventh century.

The key figure in this transformation was Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085). Pope Gregory challenged the practice of simony (the buying

<sup>13</sup> John W. O’Malley, “The Millennium and the Papalization of Catholicism,” *America* 182, no. 12 (April 8, 2000): 14.

and selling of church offices and the sacraments) and reasserted the authority of the pope in all clerical appointments. In the eleventh century, bishops were ordinarily elected in cathedral chapters (a gathering of local church leaders) in which the nobility had come to take a prominent role. Many criticized the undue influence of the nobility on episcopal elections and controversy over these elections was common. The autonomy and integrity of local church leadership was being called into question. Pope Gregory responded dramatically to reassert his own universal jurisdiction and the proper autonomy of the bishops with a series of sweeping reforms. His intent was not the expansion of papal control *per se*, but the preservation of the bishops' authority and necessary autonomy with respect to the nobility.

Pope Gregory's ambitious reform program included measures to standardize canon law. He required that all archbishops receive the *pallium* (a vestment made of wool and worn around the neck that symbolized their pastoral role as shepherd) directly from the pope within three months of their election. He widened the use of papal legates in other countries, the authority of whom was superior to that of local bishops and metropolitans. Gregory's reforms began a new trajectory in the development of the papacy. In the centuries that followed, the title *vicarius Christi* (a title previously shared by all bishops and even kings) took on a new meaning. No longer did it convey the sense of one who was transparent to God's will and purposes as it did during the first millennium. The title was now reserved exclusively to the pope and conveyed the sense that he was an earthly surrogate for Christ.<sup>14</sup> Pope Gregory's reforms may have had as their purpose the preservation of the autonomy of the church, however, as William Henn has observed, "one may wonder whether the juridical means used to achieve this end may not have overshadowed the desired effect. The desired freedom was won, but the fundamental 'sacramentality' of the church was somewhat forgotten in the face of the overriding insistence that the church is a juridically structured society."<sup>15</sup> From this point on the papacy was

<sup>14</sup> Yves Congar, "Titres donnés au pape," in *Concilium* 108 (1975): 55–64.

<sup>15</sup> William Henn, *The Honor of My Brothers: A Brief History of the Relationship Between the Pope and the Bishops* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 107–8.

"no longer merely the center and bond of unity, but the very source and origin of all churches."<sup>16</sup>

The upshot of the Gregorian reforms was the solidification of all ecclesiastical authority in the papacy. As the centuries progressed, the papacy gradually appropriated imperial trappings as it engaged in an increasingly competitive relationship with emperors and monarchs. The practice of papal coronations was established during this period and imperial seals began to appear on papal thrones. This increase in papal authority was buttressed by the influence of the Christian Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century medieval ecclesiology. Many of the medievals conceived the church as a mirror of the celestial "hierarchy." Within this pyramidal view of the church, the pope was granted the *plenitudo potestatis*, the fullness of power.

The late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries saw the Western church racked by schism. Widespread ecclesiastical corruption and a series of incompetent popes led to a situation in which, by the end of the fourteenth century, there were first two and then three claimants to the papal throne. This tragic situation led to the convocation of the Council of Constance in 1413, considered the greatest (at least in terms of representation) ecclesiastical assembly of the entire Middle Ages. This council agreed that the only viable solution was the resignation of all three claimants. The council's dramatic action, however, suggested to some that an ecumenical council had an authority independent of the papacy. Indeed, in 1415 the council promulgated the controversial decree *Haec sancta* that claimed, among other things, the supremacy of a council regarding matters of faith. The precise interpretation of this decree is a matter of some dispute. While some canonists saw in it a clear assertion of a council's primacy over the pope, others took a more moderate view, holding that the decree affirmed only that a legitimately constituted council derived its authority not from the pope but from Christ and, therefore, its teachings could command the obedience of all the faithful, including the pope.

The more extreme conciliarist position led to an inevitable backlash. In the early fifteenth century, the Council of Florence offered

<sup>16</sup> Klaus Schatz, *Papal Primacy: From Its Origins to the Present* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 86.

a muscular reassertion of the authority of the pope over councils, and, from that time on, any effort to assert even the limited regional autonomy of local bishops was viewed as an attack on the authority of the papacy and condemned as a new form of conciliarism. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, figures such as John of Torquemada and Cajetan wrote treatises asserting a profoundly monarchical vision of the papacy. Cajetan, for example, insists in his treatise *De comparatione auctoritatis Papae et Concilii* (1511) that Christ made Peter alone his vicar with all the other apostles deriving their authority from St. Peter.

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent was convened to respond to the challenges of various Protestant Reformers. The post-Tridentine church, eager to respond to the Reformation emphasis on an invisible church, gave unprecedented emphasis to the church as a visible society. For example, St. Robert Bellarmine reacted to the Reformers' denigration of the visible church by insisting that ecclesial institutions were integral to the very definition of the church: "The church is a gathering of persons which is as visible and palpable as the gathering of the people of Rome, the kingdom of Gaul, or the Republic of Venice."<sup>17</sup> The unintended consequence was, as Yves Congar put it, an ecclesiology reduced to "a defense and affirmation of the reality of the Church as machinery of hierarchical mediation, or of the power and primacy of the Roman see, in a word, a 'hierarchology.'"<sup>18</sup>

At the heart of this emerging "hierarchology," or what I have called the hierocratic form, was the rapid development of the bureaucratic apparatus of the papacy. In 1588, Pope Sixtus V set about a comprehensive reform of the Roman Curia. He established various congregations or dicasteries, each with specifically assigned responsibilities for the welfare of the church. This diluted the authority of the whole College of Cardinals as an independent body that might be able to challenge the pope. It also created a massive bureaucracy that would serve as a successful instrument in furthering papal policy and

<sup>17</sup> Robert Bellarmine, *De Conciliis, et Ecclesia, De Controversiis: Christianae Fidei Adversus Haereticos* (Rome: Giunchi et Menicanti, 1836), 2: bk. 3, chap. 2, p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> Yves, Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, rev. ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 45.

unifying church practice. During a period that saw the emergence of many national monarchies, the papacy began to organize itself according to such a monarchical model. In spite of these centralizing forces, up to the French Revolution the church remained, from the perspective of organizational polity, “a federal body,” with bishops retaining significant authority within their local churches.

A more profound ecclesial shift transpired in the wake of the French Revolution and its unprecedented attack on the French church. The papacy was impotent to do anything in response to this virulent antichurch program. In 1798 the pope was ignominiously taken prisoner by French troops and died a year later. That same year saw the publication of a treatise by a Camaldolese monk named Mauro Cappellari that vigorously defended the prerogatives of the papacy. The book was titled *The Triumph of the Holy See and the Church over the Attacks of Innovators, Who Are Rejected and Fought with Their Own Weapons*, and in it Cappellari offered an impassioned defense of unfettered papal authority. He argued for the absolute authority of the papacy based on the analogy of the sovereign authority of the state. The substance of his sweeping claims to papal authority took on a greater significance when, in 1831, Cappellari was elected as Pope Gregory XVI. He would soon enact a reform program known as Ultramontanism (an ecclesial attitude that looked “beyond the mountains,” that is, the Alps, to ascertain Rome’s views on a matter) that dramatically enhanced papal centralization.

The challenges to papal authority were hardly limited to France. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the papacy would struggle against a growing Italian nationalism and the potential loss of the Papal States. Italian unity was finally achieved in the war against Austria in 1859–1860, forcing Rome, under Gregory’s successor, Pope Pius IX, to give up two-thirds of its papal territories. Only the intercession of Napoleon III and the disposition of a French garrison in Rome allowed the papacy to maintain control of the territory immediately surrounding the city of Rome.

Many Catholics viewed the plight of the pope with sympathy and easily equated papal “sovereignty” in the temporal order with papal authority. At the First Vatican Council, convened in 1869, the bishops were eager to demonstrate their support for the pope. Vatican I issued a constitution, *Pastor aeternus*, that solemnly defined both papal

primacy and infallibility. The council had intended to issue another document offering a more comprehensive treatment of the church, but the council was suspended because of the Franco-Prussian War and the draft was never considered.

Even though both the German bishops and John Henry Newman argued, in the wake of *Pastor aeternus*, that Vatican I did *not* grant the pope unfettered authority, the practical impact of Vatican I's teaching was a further enhanced papo-centric vision of the church.<sup>19</sup> The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth would be marked by a curious irony: the loss of virtually all temporal authority (with the Lateran Treaty in 1929 the Catholic Church would eventually be granted the small tract of land that is now Vatican City) led to an unprecedented increase in the pope's spiritual authority. The encyclical, which first emerged as a papal instrument of instruction in the eighteenth century, would soon become an indispensable tool for the expansion of the pope's doctrinal teaching authority. In 1950, Pope Pius XII would assert in *Humani Generis* that even when a pope pronounced on a matter in his noninfallible, ordinary magisterium, that matter was no longer subject to free theological debate.<sup>20</sup> That same year the pope solemnly defined the bodily Assumption of Mary, the last pope to make an *ex cathedra* dogmatic pronouncement. The pontificate of Pius XII marked, in many ways, the apotheosis of the monarchical papacy and the achievement of a thoroughly papo-centric church leadership structure.

The brief but influential pontificate of Pope St. John XXIII, marked by his audacious decision to convene the first ecumenical council in ninety years, promised a new direction for the papacy. His successor, Pope Paul VI, helped bring the council to a successful conclusion

<sup>19</sup> See the 1875 Statement of the German Bishops, "Collective Declaration of the German Episcopate on the Circular of the Imperial German Chancellor concerning the Next Papal Election." An English translation of this statement can be found in Hans Küng, *The Council and Reunion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 283–95. Newman's response is found in his famous *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk: On Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation* (London: B. M. Pickering, 1875).

<sup>20</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, par. 20. This document is available online at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_12081950\\_humani-generis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html).

and made a number of tentative efforts to implement the council's teaching. The effectiveness of his pontificate, however, was in many ways compromised by a fear of schism. Pope Paul VI saw his ministry as that of maintaining a balancing act, often by making important concessions to the Curia. In his memoirs, Archbishop Rembert Weakland wrote:

As I analyzed the situation in which Paul found himself, I concluded that the dominant motivation behind much of what he did in that post-conciliar period could be found in his conviction that he had to reach out to the curial and other conservative cardinals. . . . The slight alterations he made on his own to the documents already approved by the bishops at Vatican II, like the one on ecumenism and the *Nota Praevia* . . . and the bold decision to take the question of contraception out of the hands of the council to write his own document—all these uncharacteristic acts were aimed at placating the conservative cardinals who feared he might betray the First Vatican Council (1870) and its definition of papal infallibility, key to the pope's role as they saw it.<sup>21</sup>

Weakland contended that even after the council, Pope Paul tried to keep the peace by way of counterbalancing appointments. He would often appoint prefects and secretaries of major dicasteries with opposing views. Sometimes he would create parallel bodies to accomplish this balancing act, like the creation of the Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice to counterbalance the more pragmatic Secretariat of State.

The pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II, the first non-Italian pope in over four hundred years, began with great promise. He boldly pursued select trajectories of conciliar teaching, particularly as regards dialogue with world religions, religious freedom, and the need for a more constructive relationship between religion and science. In spite of his many considerable achievements, his concrete exercise of papal authority marked, in many ways, a return to the pontificate of Pius XII. Like his preconconciliar predecessor, John Paul II had no patience for theological disagreement with authoritative church teaching. A number of theologians were disciplined over the course of his pontificate. He greatly enhanced papal authority through an unprecedented expansion of the papal canonization of saints and through a significant weaken-

<sup>21</sup> Rembert G. Weakland, *Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 215.



ing of the authority of episcopal conferences. Under his watch, a universal catechism was promulgated that discouraged more regional and inculturated expressions of the Catholic faith. His charismatic personality often played into a postmodern culture of spectacle. His successor, Pope Benedict XVI, pursued a more subdued public persona but maintained the same heavy-handed exercise of papal authority and suspicion of postconciliar collegial structures like episcopal conferences. In the spring of 2013, as Pope Benedict XVI undertook the remarkable act of resigning from papal office, the papacy remained in many ways, a thoroughly monarchical institution.

### III. A Sacral Priesthood

The gradual emergence of a sacral priesthood represents the third pillar in the hierocratic form of the church.<sup>22</sup> By *sacral* priesthood I mean not only a particular theological rationale for the ministerial priesthood but also a set of attitudes and practices associated with the priesthood. The sacral priesthood conceives of the priest as a minister ordained to a clerical elite, separate from the rest of the people of God, superior in holiness and wisdom, and granted exclusive responsibility for all teaching and ministry in the church. I can only briefly consider here a few historical factors that contributed to the emergence of this sacral priesthood. Many of these reach back into the first millennium, even though they do not really coalesce into a central pillar of the hierocratic ecclesial form until early in the second millennium.

A first development came as the result of a dramatic hardening of the distinction between the clergy and the laity, beginning in the fourth century.<sup>23</sup> More and more ministries, many of which had once been exercised by the laity, were now reserved for clerics. These

<sup>22</sup> Here I borrow the term used by Lafont to describe an element in what he described as the "Gregorian form of the church." See Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church*, 56–64.

<sup>23</sup> Alexandre Faivre, *Les laïcs aux origines de l'Église* (Paris: Centurion, 1984); English translation: *The Emergence of the Laity in the Early Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

diverse ministries, over time, would be reconfigured as an ascending ladder of ecclesiastical ranks, what is sometimes termed the *cursus honorum*.<sup>24</sup> In the medieval church of Rome, this *cursus honorum* took the following form: porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte (the minor orders), followed by subdeacon, deacon, presbyter, and bishop (the major orders). Lost was the sense of a plurality of ministries exercised by a multitude of the faithful for the building up of the church and in the service of the church's mission.

A second development accompanied the first, namely, the gradual sacerdotalization of the priesthood. There is considerable evidence of emerging public ministries in the New Testament church, but there is no explicit theology of a ministerial *priesthood*. We do find in the New Testament a minority tradition that affirms the priesthood of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews. In 1 Peter the entire church is affirmed as a priestly people. This biblical testimony, of course, does not negate the legitimate growth in the church's understanding of its ordained ministry and its gradual recognition that the bishop and eventually the presbyter would exercise a distinctly priestly ministry. So we can recognize in the early centuries a sense that in the Eucharist, a priestly people gathered at the table of the Lord under the presidency of a bishop who exercised a *primatum sacerdotium* (a "high" or "first priesthood"). Unfortunately, by the fifth and sixth centuries, the priestly character of all the baptized was obscured and priesthood was located exclusively in the bishop as the "head priest" and the presbyters who now shared in that ministry as "secondary priests."<sup>25</sup>

A third factor was the consequence of a momentous debate regarding the theology of the Eucharist that began in the ninth century. Prior to the ninth century, it was commonly accepted that the celebration of the Eucharist effected a twofold transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ and the transformation of the gathered community into the ecclesial body of Christ. In the

<sup>24</sup> See John St. H. Gibaut, *The Cursus Honorum: A Study of Origins and Evolution of Sequential Ordination*, Patristic Studies, vol. 3 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> James F. Puglisi, "Presider as *Alter Christus*, Head of the Body?," *Liturgical Ministry* 10 (Summer 2001): 153–58, at 154. For a more in-depth documentation of this shift, see James F. Puglisi, *The Process of Admission to Ordained Ministry*, vol. 1, *Epistemological Principles and Roman Catholic Rites* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

ninth century, a protracted dispute began regarding precisely how and in what manner the elements of bread and wine were transformed into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

This singular focus on the transformation of the eucharistic *elements* led to a gradual neglect of the transformation of the eucharistic *community*. With Eucharist and church no longer closely related, ministry involving one need not involve the other. This separation is reflected in the growing significance of the canonical distinction between the power of orders (*potestas ordinis*) and the power of jurisdiction (*potestas iurisdictionis*).<sup>27</sup> That is, it was increasingly possible to ordain one to sacramental ministry apart from pastoral leadership of a living eucharistic community. The consequence was a shift away from ordained ministry conceived as service to a community and toward ordained ministry conceived as the exercise of sacramental power. The priesthood would now be understood almost exclusively as the power to confect the Eucharist and absolve sins with no substantive reference to a concrete local church.

A fourth factor in the rise of a sacral priesthood emerges in the seventeenth century with the “French School” of spirituality led by Pierre de Bérulle, St. Jean Eudes, and St. Vincent de Paul.<sup>28</sup> The French School was intent on reforming a corrupt priesthood by way of a renewed emphasis on the holiness of the priest. Here the priest is presented as an *alter Christus*, “another Christ.” In other words, he represents Christ through his interior holiness and the offering of the holy sacrifice of the Eucharist. This new spirituality offered a fruitful resource for the reform and renewal of the priesthood but it also risked reducing priestly identity to one essential moment, when the priest pronounces the words of institution. The priest represented Christ not in his action or service on behalf of the kingdom

<sup>26</sup> The classic study of this shift in the theology of the Eucharist and its implications for ecclesiology is Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: l'eucharistie et l'Église au Moyen âge. Étude historique* (Paris: Aubier, 1949); English translation, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages; Historical Survey* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> See Laurent Villemin, *Pouvoir d'ordre et pouvoir de juridiction: Histoire théologique de leur distinction* (Paris: Cerf, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Vidal, “Presbyterat,” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), 2093–94.

but in his very being. The Oratorians, Vincentians, and Sulpicians effectively disseminated this priestly spirituality through their many seminaries established throughout the world. Indeed, for much of the first half of the twentieth century, priests were nourished on a classic expression of this spirituality in Dom Marmion's *Christ: The Ideal of the Priest*.<sup>29</sup> An overlooked curiosity regarding this development is the surprising paucity of theological reflection on the ministry of the priest in the light of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In the literature of this period, the priest acted "in the person of Christ" primarily as the one offering sacrifice, not as the one who fed the hungry, healed the sick, offered solace to the discouraged, and washed the feet of his disciples.

The result of these historical developments was a profile of the sacral priest that dominated the Catholic imagination on the eve of the council: a holy man shorn of his sexuality, possessing distinctive sacramental powers and unquestioned ecclesiastical authority.

#### **IV. A Mechanistic Theology of Grace and the Sacraments**

From the very beginning of Christianity, the sacramental life of the church played a central role in Christian discipleship and offered a privileged participation in the life of grace. Of course, neither the biblical testimony nor the documentary witness of the first several centuries of Christianity offers us anything like a systematic theology of grace and sacraments. The Latin *gratia* translated the Greek *charis*. Both were used as a noun and adjective to articulate how God's redeeming love was encountered concretely in the Christian life. Again, we cannot hope to offer anything like a history of the theology of grace and the sacramental life of the church. All that is possible is a brief marking out of important transitions over the course of church history that eventually contributed to the hierocratic form.

In the Eastern Church, grace was considered in the light of a view of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. Within this scheme, sin represented a dramatic defacing of that divine image. Christ came to heal this defaced image and to restore our capacity

<sup>29</sup> Columba Marmion, *Christ: The Ideal of the Priest* (St. Louis: Herder, 1952).

for divine communion. Christ came, in other words, to *divinize* us. Grace referred to the action of Christ divinizing the believer by way of mystical union and thereby making possible a transformed relationship with God. The sacraments were ritual participations in this process of spiritual transformation.

For much of the first thousand years in the Western church, grace was understood within the drama of the human capacity to love and sin understood as a rejection of that invitation. St. Augustine, that great fourth- and fifth-century bishop and theologian, offered a theology of grace and sacraments that would dominate the church for centuries to come. For Augustine, love was the act whereby we commit ourselves to one thing and not to another. It is this act of choosing, this act of the will, which brings us happiness. The task of the Christian life is to order the will, the seat of love, to choose properly. Thus Augustine could say: *dilige et quod vis fac* ("love, and do what you will").<sup>30</sup>

Yet here we encounter a fundamental difficulty, for Augustine, reflecting on his own experience, found that it was impossible for humans to properly order our loving. Our wills were so wounded by sin that we were unable to choose God. This is not simply the result of our own sinfulness, however. It is through Adam's disobedience that we have inherited a disordered will; a will that is in bondage to the flesh. This bondage leads us to further sin. Grace is thus conceived as a dramatic, divine force encountered particularly through the sacraments that liberates us from the bondage of sin and heals us of all that prevents us from the life of love.

Early Christianity, both East and West, developed within a cultural milieu heavily indebted to Platonism. In a Platonic world, that which was most "real" was the spiritual realm of eternal ideas and forms. All created things find their true meaning and significance within the spiritual realm. What we today might call sense data could be trusted only to the extent that it was seen as sharing in or participating in the spiritual world. This goes against our modern instinct to put our trust in empirical sensory data. If we can see it and touch it, it must be real. Early Christian thought went in a quite different direction. Thus, over much of the first thousand years, the sacramental life

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 7*, on 1 John.

of the church was understood simply as a symbolic participation in the spiritual realm. A deep sacramental consciousness came easily within a Platonic milieu.

The next great transition in the Christian understanding of the life of grace and the sacraments came in the thirteenth century with the contributions of St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>31</sup> Whereas Augustine was shaped by the inheritance of the philosophy of Plato, this Dominican friar drew insight from the contributions of yet another ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. If Plato understood all created reality as fundamentally dependent on the spiritual realm of eternal forms, Aristotle emphasized the relative autonomy of created realities. Thomas drew on the contributions of Aristotle and recognized that all creatures have a distinctive created nature that allows them to be what they are. This is the case for humans as well, yet humans, Thomas insists, can access a spiritual dimension (the realm of grace) that does not compete with their natural existence but rather brings it to its perfection. Thus, where Augustine thought of grace in the light of the reality of human sinfulness, Thomas thought of grace as the perfection and elevation of human nature so as to make possible friendship with God. In this regard Thomas distinguished between *uncreated* grace, the very power and love of God itself, and *created* grace, as the concrete effects of grace in the life of the believer. The sacraments provide believers with the ordinary means for entering into and enhancing their graced friendship with God.

In the late Middle Ages the theological breakdown of this Thomistic understanding of grace, widespread corruption in the administration of the sacraments, and a poorly educated clergy combined to produce a church in which popular sacramental practice and sound theological understandings of that practice were widely separated. That late medieval world was susceptible to stringent theological critique of the kind offered by the sixteenth-century Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Although, in many quarters of the

<sup>31</sup> My Franciscan friends and colleagues will have to forgive me for not giving the Franciscan tradition of St. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus, for reasons of space, the attention it properly deserves.

church, a vital Catholic sacramental life continued to thrive,<sup>32</sup> the Reformers had correctly identified numerous abuses in the church's liturgical and sacramental life. They criticized what appeared to be a magical understanding of the sacraments, an excessive preoccupation with the intercession of the saints who functioned like feudal patrons, a clericalization of Christian worship, and a diminution of the active participation of all the baptized in the Eucharist. Some, like Ulrich Zwingli, presented more radical challenges, sweeping away the entire Catholic sacramental system.

The force and scope of these attacks put the late medieval church on the defensive. The Council of Trent, which met intermittently between 1545 and 1563, sought in its own way to address many of the abuses in Catholicism that had raised the ire of the Reformers, even as it defended church teaching from its more extreme detractors. In 1562, the council issued a decree that addressed many of the abuses that had been criticized by the Reformers. Trent instigated a postconciliar liturgical/sacramental reform that relied on the standardization of Catholic worship and the suppression of liturgical diversity in favor of a sweeping regimen that enforced uniformity in liturgical practice.

This program to establish widespread uniformity in liturgical practice led to a comprehensive reform of the church's liturgical books and the extensive codification of liturgical rules, or rubrics. New printing technologies allowed for a rapid dissemination of these liturgical books throughout the whole church. The period between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries witnesses a growing preoccupation with liturgical rubrics that would govern virtually every aspect of Catholic liturgical life.<sup>33</sup> It was not long before determinations of the very efficacy or validity of church sacraments were viewed in the light of these rubrics. To violate the slightest rule put the efficacy of the sacraments in jeopardy. This new attention to liturgical rubrics was accompanied by a shift in the Catholic theology of grace.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the illuminating study of Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Jounel, "From the Council of Trent to Vatican Council II," in *The Church at Prayer*, vol. 1: *Principles of the Liturgy*, ed. A. G. Mortimort (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 63–84.

For much of church history, grace was understood in the light of the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers. As we saw above, for Thomas Aquinas the primary understanding of grace was that of uncreated grace, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christians that made possible friendship with God. In the period after the Reformation, grace is less frequently understood as the indwelling of God in the believer (uncreated grace) or as the spiritual life principle which by baptism becomes a permanent, created feature of our Christian existence (*habitual* grace). Instead, emphasis is placed on *actual* grace, a special, transitory force which is occasional in nature and which moves us through our emotions and our will to do what is right. Baroque Catholicism was marked by the flourishing of this theology of grace, with its emphasis on the particular actions and manifestations of God's activity in the church and world. It was reflected in the bold ministerial activism of so many new professed religious communities. It found expression in active spiritualities like that championed by St. Ignatius Loyola and the Society of Jesus, which emphasized the importance of finding God in all things.

This baroque theology of grace could, however, also be distorted. Too often during this period, actual grace became almost "thingified," overshadowing uncreated grace and habitual grace. On the eve of Vatican II, Catholics certainly experienced the sacraments as a source of nourishment for spiritual growth. An emphasis on the correct performance of liturgical rubrics, however, and an understanding of grace as spiritual "stuff" could, and often did, devolve into a sacramental spirituality in which the sacraments functioned as automatic grace dispensers.

## **V. A Confrontational Attitude toward the World**

The final pillar of the hierocratic form was the construction of Roman Catholicism as a kind of Catholic counter-society in response to a world viewed as hostile to the church and its mission. The history of the church's relationship with the world is again so complex that it will only be possible here to mark out a few basic shifts in the church/world relationship over the course of two millennia of church history.



Early Christianity harbored an imminent expectation of Christ's return that led to a markedly hostile attitude toward the world. For early Christians, conversion to the faith required a considerable social relocation; it meant changing the group within which the believer identified him- or herself. In sociological terms, Christian conversion brought one into a new primary reference group. It was common for early Christians to refer to themselves as constituting a new *genos*, that is, a new race or nation. Even the opponents of Christianity referred to Christians derisively as a "third race," neither Greek nor Jew, but something else altogether different.<sup>34</sup> Origen, that great third-century thinker from Alexandria, wrote: "But we know of the existence in each city of another sort of country, created by the Logos of God."<sup>35</sup> This "other country" was, of course, the church.

Much of this would change with the fourth-century Constantinian settlement that ended the sporadic persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. The church was called into an uneasy partnership with the state.<sup>36</sup> This rapprochement was not universally welcomed. For example, Augustine would take a cautious stance toward the church's cooperation with the powers of this world and particularly with the state. Augustine will address this dilemma in his famous work, *The City of God*. The great North African bishop walked a fine line, asserting on the one hand that it was possible for Christians to participate in civil community while still relativizing the value of that civil society in comparison to church life. Augustine posited a secular realm in which there was a real contestation between Christian and pagan values.<sup>37</sup>

Others took an even more pessimistic view of the possibility of a Christian's participation in civil society. Early Christian hermits

<sup>34</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>35</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 510.

<sup>36</sup> Space limitations prohibit our consideration of the very different configurations of the church/world relationship in Byzantium or in the development of Christianity in the Eastern orbit of Armenia, Syria, India, or, for that matter, in Ethiopian Africa.

<sup>37</sup> My reading of St. Augustine here is indebted to Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

and monastic groups, particularly in the fourth and fifth centuries, deliberately withdrew from what they viewed as a hostile world. Thomas Merton aptly describes this movement, writing of a group of hermits known as the "Desert Fathers":

Society . . . was regarded by them as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life. . . . These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society was purely and simply a disaster. The fact that the Emperor was now Christian and that the "world" was coming to know the Cross as a sign of temporal power only strengthened them in their resolve.<sup>38</sup>

As the Western church moved into the Middle Ages, it further implicated itself in a feudal culture, establishing an ecclesial and geopolitical reality known as Christendom that sustained an uneasy partnership of church and empire. Within this partnership, popes and emperors sparred for supremacy.

The Reformation rent asunder the precious unity of the Western church of the Middle Ages. The rise of modern science in the work of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton presented an unprecedented challenge to the authority of the church, as did the Enlightenment with its celebration of autonomous human reason. We must add to this the virulent anticlericalism of the French Revolution that marked the beginning of a series of political revolutions over the next seventy-five years that abolished, at least temporarily, a number of church-supported monarchies.

In the nineteenth century, church authorities issued more and more ecclesiastical pronouncements on "worldly affairs." Popes would condemn unwarranted state interference in church matters and would repeatedly insist that the state had an obligation to preserve the right of Catholics to practice their faith. In Western Europe, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw dramatic social developments occasioned by the rise of industrialism and dramatic population shifts from rural areas to the cities. The church was quick to recognize the potentially dangerous social consequences

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 3.

of these developments. While the anticlericalism of the French Revolution abated to an extent, the tumultuous events of the nineteenth century only exacerbated the church's defensive posture toward a world perceived as increasingly hostile to the church. Pope Gregory XVI produced a series of condemnations of modern liberalism, and Pope Pius IX, initially open to the liberal impulse, was shocked by the wave of nationalist revolutions that swept Western Europe in 1848 and took up Gregory's substantial repudiation of liberalism.

With the pontificate of Leo XIII in the late nineteenth century, the church embarked on a more positive, if still quite cautious, engagement with the issues of the larger world. Yet this stance was short-lived. The violent reaction to modernism early in the pontificate of Pope Pius X reinforced key elements of the siege mentality preponderant since the Reformation. A confrontational stance toward society continued in the first half of the twentieth century with the papacy issuing sharp rebukes of significant elements of modern capitalism, socialism, industrialism, and a continued program of state encroachment in church matters. The specific formulation of Catholic social teaching would be warranted by ever-more expansive claims to papal authority in the affairs of the world. It would be left for the pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council to reconceive the church's relationship to the larger world.

In this chapter I have provided a brief outline of the emergence of key components or "pillars" contributing to the hierocratic form of the church. This ecclesial form was the result of centuries of development. It bears repeating that a negative judgment of the adequacy of this ecclesial form does not require that we deny its positive features. Many Catholics found life within the hierocratic form of the church meaningful and fulfilling. In the United States, for example, parishes often provided a rich sense of community, sustained as they were by the various parochial schools, sodalities, and other parish-based voluntary associations. These parish communities sustained a thick sense of Catholic identity that helped hand on the Catholic tradition. This Catholic culture produced strong families, encouraged frequent celebrations of the sacraments, and provided religious education that genuinely influenced peoples' lives. Limiting our reflections here to the US Catholic context, however, it was unclear whether

the Catholic life the hierocratic form encouraged was sustainable in the modern world.

By the 1930s, cracks began to appear in the thick Catholic culture of ghetto Catholicism. The work of Catholic social theorists like John A. Ryan demonstrated the applicability of Catholic social teaching to American political and economic issues. The Great Depression drew Catholics into larger debates about the welfare of American society.<sup>39</sup> In the wake of World War II, many immigrant Catholics became much more conscious of their American identity. In a quite different key, countercultural proponents of what might be called radical Catholicism, like Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, encouraged Catholics to emerge from their immigrant enclosures and challenge key features of the American settlement in the light of their Catholic faith. The American Jesuit John Courtney Murray demonstrated the possibility of a rapprochement between Catholic teaching and the American constitutional principle of separation of church and state. All of this simply reinforced the social factors that emerged in the wake of World War II that were inexorably dismantling the American Catholic subculture. As Jay Dolan has pointed out,

even if Vatican II had never happened, the renewal of Catholicism would still have taken place in the United States. That is because the social and cultural transformation of the post-World War II era proved to be as important if not indeed more important for American Catholics than Vatican II.<sup>40</sup>

These social and cultural tectonic shifts taking place below the surface of American Catholicism tracked closely with similar developments in Western Europe. Together they provided the backdrop to the more explicitly ecclesiological shifts associated with the Second Vatican Council.

Although it is unlikely that any of the bishops would have explicitly described their efforts as a reaction to a "hierocratic form of the church," they were clearly responding to perceived inadequacies in Catholic theology, discipline, and practice at the midpoint of the

<sup>39</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

twentieth century. In short, the bishops recognized the shortcomings of the ecclesial *status quo*. This led them to a more discerning reading of “the signs of the times” and a creative appropriation of neglected elements of the great tradition. The result, whether the bishops were explicitly aware of it or not, was the partial construction of an alternative form of the church, one more capable of addressing the challenges of the modern age.

We are now in a position to consider the council’s response to the inadequacies of the hierocratic form. Part of that response was embodied not just in the documents the council produced but in its very conduct. The ecclesial dynamics at work at the council suggested a new way of being church. The council’s singular achievement is justly celebrated today, but few can appreciate how perilous was the work of the council and how close the council came to disaster. A study of the forces and conciliar dynamics that redirected the council away from its perilous beginnings has as much to teach the church today as a study of the council’s documents. It is to that remarkable story that we must turn in the next chapter.