Last week Monday (June 10), roughly six weeks after the release of the Open Letter accusing Pope Francis of “the canonical delict of heresy,” a new document appeared on the scene. Entitled a “Declaration of the truths relating to some of the most common errors in the life of the Church of our time,” the eight-page text offers a list of 40 propositions (arranged under four subject headings) which are intended to reaffirm basic Catholic doctrine while refuting a myriad of “common errors,” as the document’s lengthy title implies.

The Declaration itself is accompanied by a two-page explanatory note by which the group of five episcopal signatories — among them, Cardinal Raymond Burke and Bishop Athanasius Schneider — explain their reasons for publishing the text and what they hope their initiative will accomplish.

“In our time,” they begin, “the Church is experiencing one of the greatest spiritual epidemics, that is, an almost universal doctrinal confusion and disorientation, which is a seriously contagious danger for spiritual health and eternal salvation for many souls. At the same time one has to recognize a widespread lethargy in the exercise of the Magisterium on different levels of the Church’s hierarchy in our days.”

Hence, cognizant of their “grave responsibility as Catholic bishops” and “[i]n the spirit of fraternal charity,” the signatories offer their “Declaration of truths as a concrete spiritual help, so that bishops, priests, parishes, religious convents, lay faithful associations, and private persons as well might have the opportunity to confess either privately or publicly those truths that in our days are mostly denied or disfigured.”

This is no doubt a noble intention, and one that is clearly lacking in the majority of the Church’s hierarchy (most notably, the current Roman Pontiff). However, as we shall see, this new Declaration, despite its generally orthodox contents and the good will of its signers, is deficient in a couple of key ways: **(1)** It fails to identify the roots of the “common errors” it opposes; and **(2)** it fails to answer the urgent appeal found in the aforementioned Open Letter, namely, for the world’s bishops “publicly to admonish Pope Francis to abjure the heresies that he has professed.”

Unintended Indictment of Vatican II

Those who have read the Declaration and its explanatory note know that the signatories quote from a variety of ecclesiastical sources, both pre- and post-Conciliar, as a means of bolstering their points. According to this author’s count, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) is referenced eight times throughout the Declaration (nine, if one includes the single “Roman Catechism of the Council of Trent” citation), while Pope John Paul II’s (r. 1978-2005) name

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appears 11 times in connection with several documents from his pontificate (e.g. *Veritatis Splendor*, *Evangelium Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*). Pope Paul VI (r. 1963-1978), in turn, is the third-most quoted source with five citations total (e.g. *Credo of the People of God*, *Humanae Vitae*).

Interestingly, the signatories only invoke the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) three times — twice in the explanatory note (*Lumen Gentium*) and once in the Declaration itself (*Gaudium et Spes*). To traditional Catholics, this may appear as a positive quality, but it also begs a question for the five signatories, who implicitly affirm the goodness of the Council by defending the legitimacy of Benedict XVI's (r. 2005-2013) "hermeneutic of continuity" — the notion that the entire Council, even its novelties, can be interpreted in harmony with Tradition — in the very first paragraph of their Declaration. The question is: If Vatican II is truly in continuity with Tradition, then why are the Council documents apparently incapable of combating the errors identified in the Declaration?

Many of the identified errors have plagued the Church *for decades* — some of them *precisely since the Council* — and not just since a certain Argentinian cardinal assumed the Chair of Peter, so why is the Council largely impotent when it comes to dealing with the current doctrinal crisis?

John Paul II, the pope most cited in the Declaration, wanted us to believe that "*the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance*" (emphasis in original) and are, in fact, the remedy for what ails the Church. In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Jan. 6, 2001), he went on to assert confidently of the documents:

> "They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church's Tradition. Now that the [Year 2000] Jubilee has ended, I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century*: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning." (n. 57, emphasis in original)

The reality, however, is that *the Council itself* has contributed greatly to the cancerous spread of certain errors identified in the Declaration, in particular, the errors of **(1)** religious indifferentism, **(2)** ecumenism, and **(3)** "religious freedom" so-called. Here follows a brief demonstration.

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Religious Indifferentism

Truth #6 in the Declaration rightly asserts, "**Spiritualities and religions that promote any kind of idolatry or pantheism cannot be considered either as 'seeds' or as 'fruits' of the Divine Word**, since they are deceptions that preclude the evangelization and eternal salvation of their adherents…" (emphasis added). Yet the Council advances this exact error, even using the same language at times, in multiple places (emphasis added throughout):

- "Through her [the Church's] work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, **whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected** unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man." — *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), n. 17
- "In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them [Catholics] be joined to those men [non-Catholics] by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; **let them [Catholics] gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows.**" — *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church), n. 11
- "**The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions** [i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, various other forms of paganism]. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, **those precepts and teachings** which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless **often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.**" — *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), n. 2

If those Conciliar texts are not clear enough in themselves, John Paul II reinforced their meaning repeatedly throughout his lengthy pontificate. Take, for example, the following words of his from a 1998 Wednesday General Audience, citing the same Conciliar texts and relating them to his own teaching:

> "In *Nostra aetate*…the Second Vatican Council teaches that 'the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions….' (*Nostra aetate*, n. 2).

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> Taking up the Council's teaching from the first Encyclical Letter of my Pontificate [*Redemptor Hominis*, 1979], I have wished to recall the ancient doctrine formulated by the Fathers of the Church [note the absence of actual references], which says that we must recognize 'the seeds of the Word' present and active in the various religions (*Ad gentes*, n. 11; *Lumen gentium*, n. 17). This doctrine leads us to affirm that, though the routes taken may be different, 'there is but a single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in its quest for God and also in its quest, through its tending towards God, for the full dimension of its humanity, or in other words, for the full meaning of human life' (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 11)." — General Audience, Sept. 9, 1998

During this same audience, he affirmed that "authentic religious experience" and "prayer" are possible for people of all different faiths — a hallmark of the Modernist heresy (cf. Pope St. Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, nn. 14-15) — recalling, "We experienced an eloquent manifestation of this truth at the World Day of Prayer for Peace on 27 October 1986 in Assisi, and on other similar occasions of great spiritual intensity." Assisi, the pan-religious abomination, organized and presided over by John Paul II, during which adherents of pagan religions worshiped their idols — more accurately, "devils" (Ps. 95[96]:5; 1 Cor. 10:19-21) —inside a Catholic basilica.

If John Paul II's "Assisi 1986" was not a display of Modernist religious indifferentism — a flagrant violation of Truth #6 in the new Declaration, speciously "justified" by the Council documents themselves — I don't know what is.

Ecumenism

After decrying "[s]piritualities and religions that promote any kind of idolatry or pantheism" (Truth #6), the Declaration attempts to define the true sense of "ecumenism", one of the quintessential novelties of the Council: "True ecumenism intends that non-Catholics should enter that unity which the Catholic Church already indestructibly possesses in virtue of the prayer of Christ…. Ecumenism, therefore, may not legitimately have for its goal the establishment of a Church that does not yet exist" (Truth #7).

But what does Vatican II actually teach on this subject? In addition to the nebulous phrase, "the one Church of Christ…subsists in the Catholic Church," found in *Lumen Gentium* (n. 8), the Council's Decree on Ecumenism states:

> "**Catholics, in their ecumenical work**, must assuredly be concerned for their

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> separated brethren, praying for them, keeping them informed about the Church, making the first approaches toward them. But **their primary duty is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done or renewed in the Catholic household itself**, in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have come to it from Christ through the Apostles." — *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 4

There you have it. The "primary duty" of Catholics *is not* to work for the conversion of non-Catholics to the one true Church, but "to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done or renewed in the Catholic household itself". Why? In essence, because we are all sinners in need of deeper conversion (true), so Catholic sinners have no business telling non-Catholic sinners they need to convert in order to be saved (false).

Moreover, concerning "that unity which the Catholic Church already indestructibly possesses" (Declaration, Truth #7), *Unitatis Redintegratio* repeats the ambiguous language of *Lumen Gentium*, stating, "We believe that this unity subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose" (n. 4), as if "that unity which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning" (*ibid*.) could subsist anywhere other than the Catholic Church, which alone *is* "His Church". The Conciliar notion that "the Church of Christ" is something other or larger than the Catholic Church *simpliciter* is a prime example of attempting to establish "a Church that does not yet exist" (Declaration, Truth #7).

The bottom line concerning Vatican II and ecumenism is this: *Nowhere* in the Council documents can one find an unequivocal reaffirmation of the teaching of Pope Pius XI (r. 1922-1939), which is nothing other than perennial Catholic doctrine:

> "…it is clear why this Apostolic See has never allowed its subjects to take part in the assemblies of non-Catholics: **for the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it**, for in the past they have unhappily left it." — *Mortalium Animos* (Jan. 6, 1928), n. 10 (emphasis added)

Religious Freedom

To conclude this brief demonstration that the new "Declaration of Truths" is, in fact, an unintended indictment of Conciliar errors, we turn our attention to Truth #11 in the Declaration, which states: "The gift of free will with which God the Creator endowed the

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human person grants man the natural right to choose only the good and the true. **No human person has, therefore, a natural right to offend God in choosing the moral evil of sin, the religious error of idolatry, blasphemy, or a false religion**" (emphasis added).

Absolutely true. If only the Council Fathers had upheld the same truth. Sadly, they did not:

> "**This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom.** This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that **no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly**, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits." — *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 2 (emphasis added)

While the Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom does acknowledge that "all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth," it ultimately grants equal rights to error:

> "However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy **immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom**. Therefore, the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, the right to **this immunity continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it and the exercise of this right is not to be impeded**, provided that just public order be observed." — *Ibid.* (emphasis added)

And yet, all of Catholic Tradition repeats with Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878-1903) that "it is contrary to reason that error and truth should have equal rights" (*Libertas*, n. 34).

Why are the Council documents incapable of combating the errors listed in the Declaration? *Because those documents are part of the problem*, not the solution, and in more ways than time or space will allow us to examine at present. Suffice it to say that until the Council itself is clearly acknowledged as part of the problem—until the "hermeneutic of continuity" is rejected as *impossible*, at least with regard to the Council's "profane novelties" (1 Tim. 6:20)—then several of the "common errors" identified in the Declaration will remain exactly

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that, *common* errors.[1] Moreover, any good the Declaration might do is undermined by its first proposition in which the signatories pledge allegiance to "living tradition" and the "hermeneutic of continuity," concepts which claim to square the circle of reconciling the truly Catholic propositions in the Declaration with the documents of and following Vatican II.

The Unnamed Yet Obvious Culprit

The more obvious defect in the new Declaration is the absence of an explicit admonition of Pope Francis, despite the fact that many of the "common errors" identified are, in fact, *his* errors. To refer, once again, to the Open Letter in which Pope Francis is accused of "the canonical delict of heresy," several of the Declaration's 40 propositions correspond exactly — in some cases, *verbatim* — to the seven heresies listed in the Open Letter, all of which are demonstrably held by Francis (whether pertinaciously or not is a matter for the bishops to investigate, as the Letter implores them to do).

The Declaration's Truth #9, for example, states: "The religion born of faith in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God and the only Savior of humankind, is the only religion positively willed by God. The opinion is, therefore, wrong that says that just as God positively wills the diversity of the male and female sexes and the diversity of nations, so in the same way He also wills the diversity of religions."

Obviously, this is intended to contradict the notorious error found in Francis' "Document on Human Fraternity", namely: "The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings." The Open Letter likewise identifies this error and lists it as Heresy (VII): "God not only permits, but positively wills, the pluralism and diversity of religions, both Christian and non-Christian."

Similarly:

- Truth #12 in the Declaration opposes Heresy (I) in the Open Letter, which corresponds to *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 295;
- Truth #13 opposes Heresy (II) (cf. AL 295, 299, 301, 303);
- Truth #14 opposes Heresy (III) (cf. AL 298, 301);
- Truth #15 opposes Heresy (VI) (cf. AL 304);
- Truth #20 opposes Heresy (IV) (cf. AL 295, 298-299, 301, 303); and

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- Truth #23 opposes Heresy (V) (cf. AL 303).

Since the Declaration clearly targets the *errors of Francis*, especially those found in *Amoris Laetitia*, why did the signatories refrain from stating the obvious? Their only reference to Francis is found in the explanatory note and makes it sound as though he has nothing to do with the proliferation of the errors they are seeking to combat:

> "A common voice of the Shepherds and the faithful through a precise declaration of the truths will be without any doubt an efficient means of a fraternal and filial aid for the Supreme Pontiff in the current extraordinary situation of a general doctrinal confusion and disorientation in the life of the Church."

Yes, "confusion and disorientation" for which he is *personally* and *largely* responsible!

With all due respect to the signatories, what Pope Francis needs from them is an explicit and formal *correction* — a fraternal "rebuke", as the Open Letter urgently requests — not another "Profession of the Immutable Truths about Sacramental Marriage" or "Apostolic Reaffirmation of the Gospel". At this late hour, amidst what their explanatory note rightly calls "one of the greatest spiritual epidemics" in Church history, the time for generalized reaffirmation formulas is long since passed. It is time to resist Peter "to the face" (Gal. 2:11).

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[1] For further reading on this crucial subject, including scholarly challenges to the Modernist expressions "living Tradition" and "living Magisterium" quoted in the Declaration, see the following sources:

- "Petition to Pope Benedict XVI for a more in-depth examination of the Second Vatican Council", dated Sept. 24, 2011 and signed by 50 Italian theologians and scholars, including the renowned Msgr. Brunero Gherardini (d. 2017) and Professor Roberto de Mattei. The full petition was published in the November 2011 edition of *Inside the Vatican* magazine (pp. 20-24) and is available online at http://sspx.org/en/50-petition-pope-for-vatican-ii-re-examination.
- Msgr. George Agius, D.D., J.C.D. (1873-1962), *Tradition and the Church* (originally published in 1928) (Rockford: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 2005). As Fr. Chad Ripperger, Ph.D. wrote in his Foreword to the text (pp. vii-ix), "This book is one of the best texts written in English on Tradition, even though originally it did not enjoy a

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large circulation. It is understandable to the average layman, yet it provides a solid historical and doctrinal coverage of the basis of the theology of Tradition.”

- Roberto de Mattei, *Apologia for Tradition* (original Italian edition published in 2011) (Kansas City: Angelus Press, 2019), especially Part II (The Church’s *Regula Fidei* in Times of Crises of Faith), for a thorough discussion of the relationship between Tradition (one of the two sources of Divine Revelation, the other being Scripture) and the Church’s Magisterium (the guardian of Revelation, yet also subject to it). In this book, Prof. de Mattei also demonstrates that the notion of identifying the Church’s “living Magisterium” (current Pope and Bishops) with Tradition itself is an invention of Modernist theologians such as “the Dominican Fathers Louis Charlier and Marie-Dominique Chenu…” (p. 69).

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