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Three Distinct Constituencies

Innumerable devastating consequences have resulted from the post-Vatican II "renewal" of the Church — above all, a disastrous "renewal" of the Roman liturgy that Msgr. Klaus Gamber (with the future Pope Benedict XVI's approval) rightly described as, "The real destruction of the traditional Mass, of the traditional Roman rite with a history of more than one thousand years."[1] The demolition of the liturgy — the Church's *lex orandi* — has been accompanied by a splintering of the *lex credendi*, so that today there are three distinct constituencies in the ecclesial commonwealth that never existed as such before the Council: the liberal, "conservative," and "traditionalist" modes of Catholicism now firmly established as elements of ecclesial life.

The traditionalist mode, of course, involves nothing more or less than the unreconstructed Faith of our fathers as practiced by Catholics who have simply refrained from altering traditional Catholic belief or practice in ways never actually imposed on them by binding pronouncements of ecclesiastical authority, either during or after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Not even the New Mass, the supposed crown jewel of the "great renewal," was made binding on the universal Church. Quite the contrary, as Pope Benedict XVI informed the world's bishops in 2007 (to the surprise of no traditionalist) the traditional Latin Mass "was never juridically abrogated and, consequently, in principle, was always permitted." Traditionalists, quite simply, are those Catholics whose lived Faith did not change after 1962, before which every Catholic who seriously practiced the Faith was what is now called a traditionalist.

As for the liberal mode, since the mid-19th century the Church has been plagued by liberal Catholics (later denominated Modernists), to be sure, but they were repeatedly denounced as ecclesial outliers and outlaws by the pre-Vatican II Popes, including Pius IX (r. 1846-1878), who famously declared: "I have always condemned Liberal Catholicism and I will condemn it forty times over if it be necessary."[2] Liberal Catholicism has numerous pestilent elements, but they all come under the heading of Condemned Proposition No. 80 in Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864): "The Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile and adapt himself to liberalism, and modern civilization."[3] Which is to say that the Church as a whole, in all departments, should reconcile itself with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.

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Liberal Catholicism and Modernism

Thus, when liberal Catholicism took the form of Modernism, threatening to emerge from the ecclesial underground in which it was percolating, Pope St. Pius X (r. 1903-1914) denounced the Modernists and required that his Oath Against Modernism (1910) be taken by every cleric and theologian. And in his encyclical *Pascendi* (1907), "On the Doctrines of the Modernists," Pius X described their subversive program in terms that sum up all the blundering "reforms" of the past 60 years:

> "From all that has preceded, some idea may be gained of the reforming mania which possesses them*: in all Catholicism there is absolutely nothing on which it does not fasten*. Reform of philosophy, especially in the seminaries: the scholastic philosophy is to be relegated to the history of philosophy among obsolete systems, and the young men are to be taught modern philosophy which alone is true and suited to the times in which we live. Reform of theology; rational theology is to have modern philosophy for its foundation, and positive theology is to be founded on the history of dogma. As for history, it must be for the future written and taught only according to their modern methods and principles. Dogmas and their evolution are to be harmonized with science and history.…
>
> *Regarding worship, the number of external devotions is to be reduced*, or at least steps must be taken to prevent their further increase, though, indeed, some of the admirers of symbolism are disposed to be more indulgent on this head. *Ecclesiastical government requires to be reformed in all its branches, but especially in its disciplinary and dogmatic parts*. Its spirit with the public conscience, which is not wholly for democracy; *a share in ecclesiastical government should therefore be given to the lower ranks of the clergy, and even to the laity, and authority should be decentralized*.
>
> *The Roman Congregations, and especially the index and the Holy Office, are to be reformed*. *The ecclesiastical authority must change its line of conduct in the social and political world*; *while keeping outside political and social organization, it must adapt itself to those which exist in order to penetrate them with its spirit*. With regard to morals, they adopt the principle of the Americanists, that the active virtues are more important than the passive, both in the estimation in which they must be held and in the exercise of them.…" (*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, no. 38, emphasis added)

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If anything, Pius X's dire assessment of the "Modernist as reformer" may have underestimated the threat, which has since been realized at the very summits of the Church, the Oath against Modernism having been abolished two years after the Council with the approval of Paul VI, a deluded visionary of ecclesial "newness" who lived to rue the consequences of his own delusion. Surely, not even in his worst nightmares could St. Pius X — or even Paul VI! — have foreseen the Church's current state. Consider, in particular, the program of the current pontificate with its loosening of moral strictures, its religious indifferentism, its incessant denunciations of "rigid" Catholics and their staunch defense of doctrine and dogma, its attack on traditional worship and formation in the seminaries and convents, its soft-pedaling of the Church's teaching against abortion and sodomy while condemning capital punishment as immoral and demanding its worldwide abolition, and its veritable leadership of the politics of the global left, right down to a papal endorsement of the "carbon tax" to "stem global warming" and a papal demand for obedience to the United Nations ("our duty is to obey").

There is no denying, except by the willfully blind, that what St. Pius X condemned (and worse) constitutes the current ecclesial status quo after more than half a century of "renewal" in the name of the Council — the Council, always the Council, but going so far beyond the Council as to render it almost irrelevant. Yet it was Vatican II itself that involved precisely an attempt — not involving Catholic doctrine as such, but an inexcusably reckless pastoral experiment — to reconcile the Church "with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization." Speaking of the wholly unprecedented conciliar documents *Gaudium et Spes* ("On the Church in the Modern World"), *Dignitatis Humanae* ("On the Right of the Person and Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious"), and *Nostra Aetate* ("On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions"), then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger disparaged the "one-sidedness" of Pius IX's *Syllabus* while describing those three conciliar documents collectively as "a revision of the Syllabus, a kind of counter-syllabus … an attempt at an official reconciliation with the new age inaugurated in 1789."[4] Vatican II, admitted the future Pope, attempted a reconciliation with the legacy of the French Revolution. What more can one say on this score without becoming tedious?

And so here we are today in the midst of the ruins of the failed post-conciliar experiment, confronting an ecclesial crisis that exceeds in depth and breadth even the Arian crisis of the fourth century. Liberal Catholicism flourishes in a triumph for Modernism, while the "conservative" Catholic doggedly defends changes in the Church that would have reduced any Pope before Vatican II to a state of apoplexy, including John XXIII himself, the very Pope of the Council. In this anomic ecclesial landscape, what we now witness among those Catholics who seek to preserve some semblance of traditional Catholicism is a kind Hobbesian state of nature in which it is every man for himself — or at best, every parish,

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diocese, lay and priestly community for itself — without even the prospect of a "social compact" that could bring order and harmony to the whole community.

Enter Bishop Barron

Enter the likes of Bishop Robert Barron, ordained by the disgraced arch-Modernist Joseph Bernardin and co-consecrated as auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles — under Pope Francis, of course — by that inveterate ultra-liberal hound of traditionalists, Cardinal Blase Cupich, who is currently engaged in defending putative President Joe Biden against some timid criticism by his fellow bishops. Barron is a purveyor of one of the many brands of reformed Catholicism being offered in place of what was handed down intact for nearly 2,000 years (with gradual and organic growth and development) before everything that Popes Pius IX and St. Pius X dreaded came to pass with the worst crisis in Church history.

Dubbed "Bishop of the Internet," Barron has become one of the many celebrity clerics self-created via social media. A lot of what he has to say is unobjectionable, albeit within the safe limits of accommodation to the very liberalization of the Church the great pre-conciliar Popes, foreseeing disaster, labored to prevent. Accordingly, Barron's response to the crisis in the Church staring him in the face is, as *Crisis* magazine rightly observes, "pitiful (but honest)" because it writes off any militant action by the hierarchy in "reforming the Church and Western culture," including Barron himself, leaving it to "families [to] preserve tradition, form close communities committed to the gospel, and, yes, show some courage against the thugs attacking their property and freedoms…."

Worse, the price Barron must pay for celebrity and maintenance of his good standing in the ecclesial establishment is that, like all the other *relatively* orthodox celebrity clerics, he is obliged to distance himself from the traditionalist constituency lest he fall victim to the ecclesial variant of cancel culture. He must, therefore, avoid anything resembling a critique of the conciliar *aggiornamento*, including its fatuous "opening to the world," which is precisely the reason he and his fellow establishment hierarchs are now impotent to engage in true reform of the Church or serious opposition to the world's ever-fiercer attacks against what remains of the ecclesial bulwarks. (Which is not to suggest that the world will ultimately succeed in conquering the Church completely, given that divine assistance will sooner or later overcome even treachery, incompetence, or cowardice on the part of the pastors, not excluding wayward Popes.)

The Rule of Goldilocks

Accordingly, rather than simply working for a restoration of what has been wrecked or cast aside in the name of the Council, as traditionalists are doing in thriving communities,

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religious orders and seminaries, Barron turns up his nose at the traditionalist constituency while dithering on about his own home-brewed prescriptions for what ails the Church today. His "Word of Fire" website is thus all about what *he* thinks ought to be done in keeping with a safely anodyne brand of nouveau orthodoxy devised according to the Rule of Goldilocks: neither liberal, which is too cold, nor traditionalist, which is too hot, but rather Barron's notion of the Faith, which he deems *just right*. An apt example is Barron's recent article entitled, "The Evangelical Path of Word on Fire," whose scant three pages manage to be rife with self-referential musing about some ill-defined "path" Barron deems the correct one for the Church (as if he had any authority in the matter):

- "***I commenced*** my writing career, roughly twenty-five years ago, as a critic of liberal Catholicism…"
- "***I laid out*** my critique of the type of Catholicism that held sway in the years after the Second Vatican Council…"
- "***I emphasized*** Christocentrism as opposed to anthropocentrism…"
- "***I took*** as my mentor Pope John Paul II, especially the sainted pontiff's interpretation of Vatican II as a missionary council…"
- "***My media ministry*** Word on Fire developed…"
- "***I did not want*** simply to name a problem…"
- "the beige Catholicism that ***I identified*** as problematic many years before…"
- "***I produced*** videos on a wide variety of theological and cultural themes…"
- "***I have never changed my mind*** about Catholic liberalism…"
- "***I continue to see it*** as, in the words of my mentor Francis Cardinal George, 'an exhausted project' …"
- "the same beige Catholicism that ***I have criticized***…"
- "If ***I*** might then nail ***my colors*** to the mast, Word on Fire represents a 'No' to both beige and self-devouring [traditionalist] Catholicism…"
- "***I have argued*** that the extreme traditionalist Catholicism of the present day is self-consuming…"
- "***I have tried*** to situate Word on Fire on the path of an evangelical Catholicism…"

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So, what exactly is this "path of an evangelical Catholicism" on which Barron has tried to "situate" his internet episcopacy and lead his many digital followers? Well, it isn't liberal Catholicism, which he never describes beyond calling it "problematic," an "exhausted project" and, most enigmatically, "beige." Nowhere in these descriptors do we see anything approaching a recognition of that threat to the very foundations of the Faith the great pre-Vatican II Popes saw in liberalism and its later manifestation as Modernism — which now "pervades" the Church, as admitted by no less than Msgr. Guido Pozzo, former Secretary of the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei* (abolished, of course, by Francis, who removed Pozzo from his post as chief Vatican defender of the rights of traditional liturgical communities). Calling the evil of liberal Catholicism an "exhausted project" — and a beige one at that! — seems a rather effete way of explaining why it is "problematic." Indeed, to call it merely "problematic" already diminishes its significance to the vanishing point, even though Modernism is everywhere in the Church today, dominating almost the whole of her visible structure from the Vatican down to the parish level. But then, someone like Bishop Barron is thoroughly averse to such antiquated terms as Modernism, being a very modern Bishop of Internet, and all.

Barron's Failed Attempt at Defining Traditionalism

What, then, of traditionalism? Here, too, Barron's categories lack "ontological density,"[5] to borrow a phrase by which the political philosopher Pierre Manent aptly describes the ultimately groundless concept of "human rights" in modern political philosophy. For Barron, the traditionalist constituency reduces to "a fiercely traditionalist movement" that "has come about, partly, as a reaction to the same beige Catholicism that I have criticized, but its ferocity is due to the scandals that have shaken the Church the past thirty years…." These "arch-traditionalist Catholics have become nostalgic for the Church of the pre-conciliar period and antipathetic toward the Second Vatican Council itself, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, and particularly our present Holy Father." They are, says Barron, guilty, guilty, guilty of "resistance to the authority of the pope and… denial of the legitimacy of an ecumenical council…." They may not be beige, Barron allows, but theirs is "a self-devouring Catholicism. Perhaps sensing this contradiction, they remain spitting-mad at anyone who would dare challenge them."

Reactive. Ferocious. Nostalgic. Antipathetic. Resistant to papal authority. Spitting mad, in fact! And — the worst sin of all — deniers of Vatican II! Traditionalists have heard all these jejune epithets before, repeated endlessly over the past 60 years of their increasingly successful effort, with God's help and despite the likes of Barron, to restore at least some areas of the devastated vineyard. As for "our present Holy Father," if Barron sees nothing amiss with his antics, which have outraged even "conservative" Catholics — such as this

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one, who laments "the disastrous papacy of Francis" — then his "evangelical path," whatever it is, would seem to lead the Church directly into the dustbin of history.

But then, Barron will not even identify himself with "conservative" Catholicism and its relative accommodation of the same post-conciliar revolution whose results "conservatives" themselves (like the disillusioned Paul VI) lament. No, not even "conservative" Catholicism is just the right bowl of porridge for Barron's taste. Quoth the Bishop of the Internet:

> "Conservative Catholicism in some of its reaction takes refuge in earlier cultural forms of faith expression and absolutizes them for all times and all places. Thoroughly imbued with the missionary spirit of Vatican II, [Cardinal George] knew that a hyper-valorization of any particular period of Church history, be it the American Catholicism of the 1950s or the European Catholicism of the thirteenth century, would seriously undermine the Church's present capacity to engage the culture in which it finds itself."

Yet again, we encounter a lack of ontological density in the Bishop's categories. What could he possibly mean by such vacuous nonsense, so typical of the cant of liberalized post-Vatican II prelates who speak as if the Church began in 1962? Obvious questions abound:

- Which "cultural forms of faith expression" would Barron regard as dispensable ephemera and which, if any, would he preserve as part of the Church's timeless patrimony? Or does he admit that there is anything at all that is timeless, precious, and untouchable in the Church's "faith expression"? If so, what would that be?
- What is the phrase "hyper-valorization of any particular period in Church history" supposed to signify? It would seem that if anyone is hyper-valorizing a particular period of Church history it is Barron: i.e., the post-Vatican II epoch and its patently ruinous "reforms," while *hypo*-valorizing the Church's entire pre-conciliar past. But it seems that *hypo*-valorizing the Church's past is fine with Barron, provided that the past begins before 1962 while all the time since then is the *nunc stans*, the now that remains forever.
- If the Church must constantly be altering its "cultural forms of faith expression" in order to "engage the culture in which it finds itself," does this not require an absolute cultural relativism that would destroy the Church's note of universality — and is, in fact, threatening to destroy it at this very moment in Church history? Moreover, how would we know, and who would inform us, when a given "cultural form of faith expression" has become outmoded and must be replaced with something new? For

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example: When and how will we know that the New Mass is no longer new, but old and up for replacement?

Standing with Vatican II against "Both Beige and Self-Devouring Catholicism"

Barron concludes by declaring that Word on Fire "represents a 'No' to both beige and self-devouring Catholicism." But what does this "No" actually stand for? Barron's description of what he is *for* is just as vague as his description of what he is against:

"[Word on Fire] stands with Vatican II, John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, the *Catechism* of 1992, and it takes as its mission the New Evangelization. It wants neither to surrender to the culture nor to demonize it, but rather, in the spirit of St. John Henry Newman, to *engage* it, resisting what it must and assimilating what it can, being, as St. Paul put it, 'all things to all people … for the sake of the Gospel' (1 Cor. 9:22–23). Against self-devouring Catholicism, it is intellectually generous, but against beige Catholicism, it desires to make all thoughts finally captive to Christ. Against the angry denizens of the Catholic right, it seeks not to condemn but to invite; against the representatives of the too-complacent Catholic left, it sees evangelization as the centrally important work of the Church."

How does "standing with Vatican II" differ from standing with the truths of the Faith? This is never adequately explained and never can be explained because it is all but meaningless, although we can certainly observe the results of this empty notion in practice: ecclesial disaster.

Furthermore, why does Barron stand with only a select list of post-conciliar popes and the 1992 *Catechism* as opposed to the constant teaching of the Church in her perennial Magisterium? Apparently, Barron intuits some sort of difference between pre- and post-conciliar Church teaching. But that would have to involve novelties introduced over the past 60 years in contradiction to the teaching of the *First* Vatican Council, which, with the approval of Pius IX, infallibly defined the strict limits of papal infallibility: "For the Holy Spirit was promised to the successors of Peter not so that they might, by His revelation, make known some new doctrine, but that, by His assistance, they might religiously guard and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the Apostles."[6] Nowhere in that deposit of faith do we find "dialogue," "ecumenism," "interreligious dialogue," or a warrant for the creation of a new Mass in the vernacular by committee.

As we see here, however, Barron's polemic relies heavily on what the great Romano Amerio called "circiterism," by which he means "referring to an indistinct and confused term as if it

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were something well established and defined, and then extracting or excluding from it the element one needs to extract or exclude. The term *spirit of the council*, or indeed *the council*, is just such an expression."[7] That form of expression is the rhetorical stock-in-trade of Barron and all the other obscurantists in the many-tented camp of the post-conciliar innovators.

What exactly is the New Evangelization, which to all appearances involves *no* evangelization? And on what terms does one "engage" the culture if one is neither surrendering to it nor demonizing it? In the first years of the Church's existence, St. Paul did tailor his approach to the Jews and Gentiles in Corinth, where he made many converts to the new religion Our Lord had just established. But after 2,000 years of growth and development in apostolic and ecclesiastical tradition, are we now supposed to act as if we were back in first-century Corinth, forced to improvise, as if the Church had nothing in her vast treasury to offer the world, including an awe-inspiring rite of Mass, a work of the Holy Ghost, that in and of itself has been an engine of conversions for century after century?

Finally, how has Barron been "intellectually generous" with traditionalists by depicting them, according to the usual neo-Catholic[8] caricature, as bitter and ferocious resistors of papal authority? Barron knows it was St. Paul himself who *resisted* St. Peter "to the face" (Gal. 2:11) under circumstances in a different Greek city, when it was not expedient to indulge Jewish custom because potential Gentile converts would be misled into believing that Jewish custom — in that case, refusing to eat with Gentiles — was part of the Faith.[9] Barron also knows that Church history offers many examples of lay and episcopal resistance to papal errors, omissions and abuses of power. Thus, Barron must know that the charge of "resisting papal authority" is just shallow demagoguery.

Barron's Taupe Catholicism

So, to conclude, Barron's ill-defined "evangelical path" — anyone can hold himself out as an evangelical pathfinder these days — is not traditionalist, nor even conservative, and certainly not beige. What is it, then? I would call it *taupe* Catholicism: beige with a mix of gray; an ambiguous shade of thought. Like the beige he attributes to the thought of the liberal Catholic constituency of which, however unconsciously, he himself is a member — his own "exhausted project" included.

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[1] Msgr. Klaus Gamber, *Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, p. 102 (with a laudatory preface by Cardinal Ratzinger for the French language edition, wherein the Cardinal calls Gamber as "a true prophet" with "the courage of true witness.")

[2] Response to a deputation of French Catholics, 18 June 1871, in Fr. Felix Sarda y Salvany, *What is Liberalism* (TAN Books, 1979), p. 55.

[3] Denzinger (trans. Roy J. Deferrari), *Enchiridion Symbolorum* 30th Edition (1954) (Loreto Publications, 2002), no. 1780 (2980 in post-1963 editions of Denzinger).

[4] Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, pp. 381-82.

[5] Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, p. 139.

[6] Denzinger-Hünermann (ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash), *Enchiridion Symbolorum* 43rd Edition (2010) (Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 3070.

[7] Romano Amerio, *Iota Unum*, no. 50.

[8] Meaning a mode of post-Vatican II Catholicism that portrays itself as *new* yet somehow also traditional in some limiting sense that disregards the indispensable role of numerous abandoned ecclesiastical and apostolic traditions, above all the traditional liturgy, in preserving the Faith. It is akin to neo-conservatism in the realm of secular politics: i.e., not really conservative, just more moderately liberal.

[9] Evidently, Barron would like to see the entire Church return to an engagement in Jewish custom: "I want to 're-Judaize' Catholicism. Because, you see, the thing is, in many parts of the Protestant movement, there's a desire to 'de-Judaize' the operation, right, that we've overcome that and we kind of left that behind. Catholicism lifts it up. It doesn't want to leave it [Judaism] behind." Interview with Ben Shapiro (Dec. 16, 2018).

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