

IN DEFENCE OF POPE FRANCIS

Recently Dr John Lamont, Canadian philosopher and theologian, published a paper asserting that Pope Francis has lapsed from the rigour of the teaching of the Catholic Church and is a heretic.¹ In doing so he has highlighted the disparity between the view of the Church proposed by the Second Vatican Council and that to which the faithful had adhered for close on twenty centuries.

In his criticism Dr Lamont cites *Dei Verbum* 11 & 12 conceding in doing so that Vatican II is a reliable authority, an ecumenical council. It is hardly open to him, then, to complain if Pope Francis does the same.

Part of his criticism turns on the replies the Pope has made to a series of *dubia* raised with him some seven years ago by four cardinals. Two of those cardinals having died, the survivors, Cardinals Burke and Brandmüller, have been joined by Cardinals Sandoval, Sarah, and Zen in putting to the Pope an amended *dubium*. Its text accepts that the Pope's expression "that the Church can deepen its understanding of the deposit of faith" is what *Dei Verbum* 8 teaches and asserts "this belongs to Catholic doctrine". The Cardinals also invoke *Lumen Gentium* 25. Accordingly they, too, concede that Vatican II is a reliable authority, an ecumenical council. No less than Dr Lamont can they complain if Pope Francis does the same.

The Pope is entitled to rely on the Council's definition of tradition in *Dei Verbum* 8:

"The Tradition that comes from the apostles progresses in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth."

The Cardinals ask: "Is it possible for the Church today to teach doctrines contrary to those she has previously taught in matters of faith and morals?" If the definition in *Dei Verbum* 8 is accepted the answer is Yes. For in holding that tradition progresses it contemplates its alteration. Growth in insight on the part of believers *via contemplation and study, via their pondering the words and realities transmitted, and from the sense of spiritual realities they experience and from preaching* may demand change.

It will be said that such an interpretation runs counter to the view the Church has long held on what is meant by 'tradition' expressed by the Council of Trent and by the (first) Vatican Council; that it ignores the expression of St Vincent of Lerins, sanctified by repetition, of what is meant by 'progress in understanding' in tradition, that it must be taken "in its own genus alone, namely in the same teaching, with the same sense and same understanding" (*eodem sensu, eademque sententia*). But the bishops at Vatican II chose not to endorse those teachings. They chose to give the term this new meaning.

¹ *Pope Francis as Public Heretic: The Evidence leaves no doubt.* See *Rorate Caeli* at <https://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2023/11/pope-francis-as-public-heretic-evidence.html#more>

Now consistent with the first law of logic, the law of non-contradiction, it is not open to the Cardinals or to Dr Lamont, to use an expression of the English common law, to approbate and reprobate, to acknowledge that the Council was ecumenical, a council whose determinations bind the Catholic faithful, then insist that one may ignore parts of what that Council taught. Let us look at the following.

Dr Lamont cites the (first) Vatican Council and its anathemas against what Pope Francis has proposed. But Vatican II paid little attention to anathemas. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium* the Council's bishops ignored this one uttered by the Council of Trent in Session 7 Canon XIII (on the Sacraments in General):

"If anyone shall say that the received and approved rites of the Catholic Church customarily used in the solemn administration of the sacraments may be disparaged, or be omitted at pleasure by the ministers without sin, or be able to be changed by whomsoever pastor (any pastor whatsoever) of the churches into other new rites: let him be anathema."

The whole burden of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the first of the Council's documents which the bishops labelled 'a constitution', contradicts this statement of Trent. It proceeds on the basis that the manner in which Mass is offered is not, as Trent said (and Pope Pius V repeated in 1570 in his bull *Quo primum*) fixed and irreformable, a matter of faith. It is one of discipline only and so alterable by pope or council. When in 1967 Pope Paul VI published his *novus ordo missae* he simply followed the direction which the Council had dictated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Given such example why should Pope Francis, why should the Church, be concerned over past anathemas?

Dr Lamont complains about the Pope differentiating between the testimonies of tradition and the cultural conditioning of these testimonies and elevating cultural conditions to the level of determinants. But the Pope is only conducting himself consistently with Vatican II's teaching that tradition progresses. Clearly altering cultural conditions serve as a means of determining how that progress is to occur.

What the Church may have in the past held to be immutable has been gainsaid by Vatican II and it is useless to cite previous ecumenical councils against a pope striving to implement its teachings. What the Church regarded as heretical in the past is simply irrelevant in current cultural conditions. Teachings on faith and morals may have been expressed in a certain way in the past. This cannot inhibit their being expressed in another way now. This is well illustrated with modernism.

What was stigmatised as 'modernist' in the past is now, courtesy of Vatican II and *Dei Verbum* 8, part of the Church's patrimony. This may be inferred from the silence of the Council concerning Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi* (September 8th, 1907) coupled with its refusal to endorse the teachings of the popes against religious freedom, notably those of Gregory XVI in *Mirari vos* (August 15th, 1832) and of Pius IX in the *Syllabus of Errors* (December 8th, 1864) nn. 15 & 16. Consistent with this, when the Council quoted from Leo XIII's encyclical *Libertas* it avoided mentioning the Pope's teaching that seemed to support Gregory XVI and Pius IX. The new attitude may be inferred, too, from the Council's insistence, against *Pascendi*, that the laity must be involved in the future of the Church. That the laity are to be involved is the central thesis of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the

Modern World. Pope Paul VI confirmed rejection of the authority of *Pascendi* when on July 17th, 1967, he abolished the anti-modernist oath.

Dr Lamont's criticism of the Pope as 'modernist' is, accordingly, misplaced or, not so much misplaced as, irrelevant. If anyone should doubt this, let him look through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* promulgated by Pope John Paul II almost 30 years after the Council's close, and see if he can find in it any mention of *Pascendi* or of the 'heresy' of modernism.

Dr Lamont criticises what the Pope says in his apostolic letter *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, namely, that:

- theology must develop using an inductive method, which starts from the different contexts and concrete situations in which peoples are inserted, and allows itself to be seriously challenged by reality;
- the knowledge of people's common sense is a *locus theologicus* that must be privileged first of all by theology;
- theology must enter into the culture, worldview, and religious tradition of a people, and develop into a culture of dialogue and encounter between different traditions and different knowledge, between different Christian denominations and different religions.

Is not the Pope here simply drawing out the implications of what Vatican II taught in *Dei Verbum* 8? Is he not facilitating a means of expression for the growth in insight of believers through their contemplation and study; from their pondering the words and realities transmitted; from the sense of spiritual realities they experience, and from preaching?

If so what is wrong with his suggestion of use of an inductive method? This is the only logical process whereby the faithful may offer theology the fruit of what they discern. Why should believers be precluded from doing so as they draw on their common sense? Does not the Council require the re-thinking of traditional theology to adapt it to current culture, to the zeitgeist and other religious traditions which the Council required the faithful to acknowledge? Are these not to be included among the spiritual realities believers experience?

Dr Lamont complains of the Pope quoting St Thomas Aquinas out of context. He advances a distinction to show the Pope is wrong to apply a remark made in one context to another. But the Pope is only following the example of the Council whose bishops luxuriated, so to speak, in abandonment of distinction. In any number of instances they ran together realities the Church had previously distinguished as, for instance, in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 7 where they glossed over what the Church had taught previously about the different species of Christ's presence in the sacraments and liturgy. If the Council paid scant attention to distinction why should the Pope be precluded from doing the same?

Vatican II demands that the Church adapt herself to the spirit of the age. No longer must she conform herself to the stereotypes of ages past with rigorous adherence to the letter of the scriptures. She must adapt. This may be painful: it will involve departures from the stances on moral issues the Church has previously held, but it must be done. In his writings of which Dr Lamont is so critical Pope Francis is simply giving voice to this movement. Let us recall

that Pope Paul VI declined in the celebrated Washington case to enforce the teaching he had proclaimed in *Humanae Vitae*, an example entire bishops' conferences were to follow as they accorded the strictures set out in the encyclical little more than lip service. Pope Paul has now been canonised. How could this or any of the elements of his conduct referred to above be viewed as against the welfare of the Church?

Finally, there is the issue and concept of synodality. The teaching of Vatican II is what underlies the now long-standing moves among popes and the episcopacy to embrace the concept. If there is no consultation, especially with the laity, how can the Church hope, consistent with what the Council so clearly taught, to ensure the growth in insight into the realities and words being passed on? Synodality ensures that there is an outlet for their contemplation and study by believers "who ponder these things in their hearts", a vehicle through which they may express "the intimate sense of spiritual realities they experience".

4th December, 2023, 60th anniversary of the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*
