

# The Reinvention of the Fisherman

## Part Two

### The rise of the monarchical Papacy

During a conversation at the beginning of Vatican II Yves Congar OP told his fellow conciliar peritus (theological expert) Hans Kung, If you want to understand the Roman Catholic Church today, look at the eleventh Century. During that critical time the world witnessed Christianity face massive secular political challenges, experienced the tragic West – East schism, the rise of Roman absolutism, the discipline of enforced celibacy and the entrenchment of stratified clericalism.

Congar was correct in identifying the papacy of Gregory VII (1073-1088) as the transformative moment for the status and function of the Fisherman in both ecclesiastical and secular societies.

“Indeed, it was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century and perhaps the greatest ecclesiologists of all time, Yves Congar, who argued that the great turning point in ecclesiology is the eleventh century. The turning point is, of course, embodied in the person of Gregory VII. Congar acknowledged, as any historian must, that Gregory VII faced overwhelming internal and external problems when he was elected, as a reformer, in 1073. Unfortunately, in a good-faith effort to amass the kind of legal support he felt he needed to combat these problems, Gregory created a new kind of papacy. As Congar pointed out, by seeking to rely on legal precedents for the exercise of what should be only a spiritual authority, Gregory ended up by making the Church itself into a legal institution with papal power as the basis for everything.

Gregory VII thereby launched the second-millennial papacy as a legalistic, monarchical office – a concept foreign to the first millennial Church and the whole of the East. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that it was Gregory VII who decreed in 1073 that the title ‘pope’ should thereafter be restricted to the Bishop of Rome. It had previously been applied to every bishop in the West, and even to priests in the East. The Roman Curia was established soon after Gregory’s pontificate, by Urban II (1088-99), but it did not become fully organised and operational until 1588, under Sixtus V (1588-90).” -Richard P. McBrien

- In Peter Phan (ed) *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook Ecclesiology* (Liturgical Press, 2000) 327.

As a result of the Gregorian reforms, actually begun by Nicholas II in 1059, papal elections were taken out of the hands of the Roman clergy and people. It now became the preserve and privilege of the College of Cardinals. In a very real sense this contributed to the creation of a power group, a church within the Church, made up of clerics who transformed themselves into a self-perpetuating ruling class of the elite and privileged. Papal hegemony and its Curial servants became institutionalised, entrenched and claimed complete authority in heaven and earth by virtue of the primacy of the Petrine office.

The culture of the Roman papal court, however, ultimately gave rise to the circumstances where power and corruption thrived to such an extent that the Church became almost totally unrecognizable from the feudal secular fiefdoms which hosted it. Martin Luther later had substantial issues with this ecclesiastical entity and its polity. He initiated the challenge from the inside and it was left then to the like-minded the outsiders to continue the protest. But perhaps the most constructively loyal criticism of papal power in the last few centuries came not from outside the Tradition but from one at its very centre, John Henry Cardinal Newman.

Newman – the sleeper in the Tradition

In an August 22, 1870 letter to his dear friend and fellow Oratorian, Ambrose St John, Newman wrote of his frustration with both Pius IX and the first Vatican Council. It was one month after the promulgation of papal infallibility,

We have come to the climax of tyranny. It is not good for a pope to live nearly twenty years. It is anomaly, and bears no fruit; he becomes a god, has no one to contradict him, does not know the facts and does cruel things without meaning it. We must hope, for one is obliged to hope it, that the Pope will be driven from Rome and will not continue the Council or that there will be another pope. It is sad he should force us to such wishes.

While Newman was quite forthright about his intense and hostile feelings in relation to Pius IX he also harboured serious reservations about the dogmatic status of papal infallibility and its demands on the assent of faith itself,

I have never thought it likely to be true, never thought it certain. .... On the whole, then, I hold it, but I count it no sin if, on the grounds of reason, I doubt

it. .... I hold the Pope's infallibility, not as a dogma, but as a theological opinion; that is, not as a certainty, but as a probability. .... I only have an opinion (not faith) that the Pope is infallible.

- Francis A Sullivan SJ, "Newman and Infallibility," in Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill (1990), *Newman after a Hundred Years*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 430.

Catholics right now need to take very seriously Newman's perspectives on the papacy's claims not only to absolute doctrinal authority but also to its demands of submission of mind and will in the assent of faith. Determining the truth of God's revelation in Christ is the work of the whole Church not just that of a privileged sector, Infallibility resides in the laity and the Magisterium in a unitary way, as a figure is contained on the seal (the Magisterium) and on the wax (the Laity) – Edward J. Miller (1987), *Newman on the Idea of the Church*.

Over the past thirty five years the papacy has chosen to forget this and to intensify its demands for total, unilateral, infantile and blind obedience. It is now described as listening to Christ but its ecclesiastical name is loyalty to the Pope and to the (his) Magisterium. More and more the Vicar of Christ has become confused with Jesus Christ himself and the Magisterium promoted as the sole embodiment of divine revelation.

Ratzinger's redefines the Church

It is becoming increasingly obvious that during his years as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Joseph Ratzinger laid out the agenda for JP II's New Evangelisation and for his own future extensive program, *The Reform of the Reform*. Integral to Ratzinger's strategy was to focus on establishing a credible sense of Continuity between the JP II – Benedict XVI Magisterium, Vatican II and previous conciliar doctrine. A major obstacle to navigate was the Second Vatican Council itself whose vision was indeed novel, sometimes even discontinuous with the thrust of former councils especially Trent and Vat I. The Ecclesiology of Vat II, while acknowledging the essential links with the past, in fact profoundly stressed the boundaries of thought, imagination and theologies of former Councils. Australian theologian Ormond Rush makes the point,

Vatican II clearly did not represent macro-rupture, but the Council did effect micro-ruptures, especially with regard to religious freedom, the Church's stance towards Judaism, the need for fundamental reform of the liturgy, and our understanding of the relationship among hierarchy, clergy and laity.

Key to Ratzinger's strategy to install his 'reformist' programmes was to insist that the documents Vat II had been misinterpreted, even distorted, and consequently there was a pressing need for urgent and authoritative correction – from above. He had to argue an ambit claim that the papal Magisterium, and those loyal to it, was the only legitimate authority to be in a position to offer such corrections and provide authentic interpretations of Vat II.

My impression is that the authentically Catholic meaning of the reality 'Church' is tacitly disappearing, without being expressly rejected. Many no longer believe that what is at issue is a reality willed by the Lord himself. Even with some theologians, the Church appears to be a human construction, an instrument created by us and one which we ourselves can freely reorganise according to the requirement of the moment. –The Ratzinger Report (1988).

The theological speculation of Cardinal Ratzinger has now taken on the certainties of his pontificate as Benedict XVI. As Pope he has enshrined a doctrine which he designed, constructed and emplaced for his predecessor JP II. Furthermore, Benedict's beatification of Karol Wojtyla could be interpreted as a move to endorse by infallible decree the entire pontificate of JP II his teaching, his systemic re-interpretation of Vatican II and the reestablishment of an authoritarian Church ruled by a monarchical papacy.

Ratzinger and the Papacy writ large

In Catholic theology, the Pope is described as the Vicar of Christ on Earth and, according to the provisions of Canon Law, he enjoys total and absolute power: juridical, executive, judicial. A demystification of that kind of power is the last thing the Papacy needs. And its minders are doing their utmost to see that this does not happen. It is called, making scorched earth around the Pope.

After installing the agenda of a re-papalized Church, it seems that Ratzinger/Benedict is spending his end days solidifying his policy in an all-out campaign to elevate the papacy to Ultramontanist heights rarely imagined. One of the most spectacular examples of this enshrinement of papal power, authority and centrality in the Tradition is seen in the homily Benedict gave at the consistory for the new Cardinals last February. In his favourite off the cuff homiletic genre, the *sensus plenior* type patristic, free-association address, Benedict used the images of architectural grandeur and permanence as analogies for the papacy and its status in his vision of the Ecclesia,

What does this sculptural composition say to us, this product of Bernini's genius? It represents a vision of the essence of the Church and the place within the Church of the Petrine Magisterium. Benedict went on to speak of the permanence and immutability of the very structure of the Church,

The Church is not self-regulating, she does not determine her own structure but receives it from the word of God, to which she listens in faith as she seeks to understand it and live it. Within the ecclesial Community, the Fathers of the Church fulfil the function of guaranteeing fidelity to sacred scripture. They ensure that the Church receives reliable and solid exegesis, capable of forming with the Chair of Peter a stable and consistent whole.

Just recently during his visit to Milan for the International celebrations for Family, Benedict was greeted rapturously by huge crowds which affirmed him as the living Vicar of Christ on earth. Benedict responded in kind reminding the people of the loyalty to the Chair of Peter expressed by St Ambrose in the fourth century,

As it is known, Ambrose came from a Roman family and ..he praises the primacy of the bishop of Rome...In Peter – he affirms -'There is the foundation of the Church and the Magisterium of Discipline and again the well-known declaration, Where Peter is, there is the Church...Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia.'

This is ecclesiology by hyperbole, a populist and dangerous adulation of the personality of the Pope and the nebulous Magisterium of Discipline. In this cult-like culture of papalism, the centrality of Christ and his human incarnation of the Kingdom of God can easily be forgotten. The Church has long guarded and valued the tradition that Jesus chose Peter and not the other way round.

It should be noted, however, that any notion of limits and boundaries on the scope and authority of the Petrine Office disappeared in Ratzinger's theology as far back as the late 1960s. He began then to rethink and radically redefine his ecclesiology, abandoning his convictions of Council years that the local ecclesial communities were and are primary, in favour of the pre-existence and pre-eminence of the Universal Church. It is not surprising then that his logic leads to the conclusion that supreme and absolute authority subsists in Peter and his Magisterium. The local ecclesial communities are essentially branch offices of the Vatican with the apostles of the Diaspora and their authority being secondary and [subservient](#).

Newman's balance: Magisterium - Hierarchy + the Laity

The episcopate, whose action was so prompt and concordant at Nicea on the rise of Arianism, did not, as a class or order of men, play a good part in the troubles consequent upon the Council, and the laity did. The Catholic people, in the length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not.

Speaking of the laity, I speak inclusively of their parish priests (so to call them), at least in many places; but on the whole, taking a wide view of history, we are obliged to say that the governing body of the Church come short, and the governed were pre-eminent in faith, zeal, courage, and constancy. – Arians in the Fourth Century.

Newman, as we have seen, was highly suspicious of papal cult at the expense of his role as the servant voice of the whole Church. The faith is not the Pope's private property, his own Depositum, but rather the collective faith of the People of God.

Newman's cautionary reminder of the critical importance of the laity as the co-guardians of the Sensus Fidelium (sense of the Faithful) and also the sensus Fidei (sense of the Faith) has been largely lost since he wrote and which Vatican II reiterated. Shared ecclesial memory of the all has fallen victim to a selective amnesia of the ecclesiastical few.

What many in the Church are calling for in addition to spiritual renewal is far reaching fundamental reform of ecclesial structure and governance. Benedict is invoking a theology of Church which is based on the affirmation of a divine plan, the actual will of the Lord which diminishes this. This kind of theological fundamentalism suggests that the Pope has a direct and privileged line of communication with God so that he is in a position, without external moderation or verification to insist on divine imperatives. It is also aided by the increasing and rather arbitrary use of the term infallible, now conveniently inserted into pontifical documents where the doctrinal note definitive was previously employed.

Newman's insistence on the critical role of the laity in affirming the right and the true in Church teaching remains one of the great subversive elements in Catholic ecclesial life. At its peril would the hierarchy dismiss the lay Sensus Fidelium as the Rambler commentary notes,

The danger now, he (Newman) asserts, is that when the hierarchy is sound and faithful, the laity should be neglected and relegated to an audience, or at best,

playing a supporting role. This kind of liberal understanding of the role of the laity in the church did not go over well with the Church authorities, and Newman remained under a cloud of Vatican suspicion for [years](#). – (note on Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine, 205).

A clear and present danger

Finally, it is worthwhile noting some perceptions about the Church today. Perceptions are important because, whether founded or not, they have the potential to make or break both individuals and organisations.

Some of these more dangerous perceptions are: that the role of the Fisherman has usurped that of the Master who called him; Peter has now become the Christ; that the institutional Church has now established coextensive borders with the Kingdom of God; that a pedagogical instrument, the Catechism of the Catholic Church has been elevated to the rank of principal interpretative tool of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, the Spirit is now captive to ideology and a tool of indoctrination; that the Code of Canon Law has been promoted as a principal guide book for those called to lead as priest, prophet and sanctifier; that the Gospel itself is now stripped of its power to confront, challenge and subvert its own servant, the Church.

The Catholic Church needs a new breath of the Spirit of God and a renewal of vision begun by John XXIII when he convoked the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago. That Council went a long way in liberating the Catholic Church from the milieu and mindset of the eleventh Century. It needs to do it all over again after just five decades.

[A valuable resource for further reading see Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren OP, “The Liberal Spirit of John Henry Newman”, Ecumenical Trends, especially [pp 5-15](#).

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