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Catholic, apostolic, and orthodox

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Abstract

Commentary on the election of Pope Leo XIV has been framed in terms drawn from political and cultural oppositions: conservative vs liberal, traditionalist vs progressive, made vivid by the 2024 film *Conclave* based on Robert Harris's 2016 novel. Part of my concern is to urge rejection of these as general terms of analysis of Catholicism, or at least to circumscribe their applications to matters inessential to Catholic faith and morals *per se*. In aid of that, and by way of broader purpose, I discuss the nature of Catholicism itself. Observing the long history of challenges, crises, and divisions, I then proceed to distinguish between subjective and objective modes of identifying the nature of individuals and institutions. Catholicism has a robust objective nature comprising a synthesis of Hebrew and Christian scripture, apostolic tradition, conciliar and other authoritative teachings, and sacramental practices, together consolidated and expressed in orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Political and cultural classifications are irrelevant to and distracting from this identification.

Keywords: apostolic tradition; Catholic spirituality; Pope Leo XIV; revelation

1. Introduction

In the weeks preceding the death of Pope Francis through to and following the election of his successor, Pope Leo XIV, the Roman Catholic Church and its papacy were the focus of intense interest, with much discussion on the characters and theological, moral and social positions of various candidates, and of how the new pope might stand in relation to his immediate and recent predecessors, Benedict XVI and John Paul II. The framing of these issues has been influenced in two ways. First, by the characterization of divisions within the Church, representing these in cultural and political terms as being between 'conservatives' and 'liberals', 'traditionalists' and 'progressives'. Second, and relatedly, by the 2024 film *Conclave* (based on Robert Harris's 2016 novel of the same title), which portrayed a fictional papal election process as a political thriller, emphasizing ambition, deception, and theological opposition personified by two leading candidates: Cardinals Gofredo Tedesco, an Italian 'conservative traditionalist', and Aldo Bellini, an American 'liberal progressive'.

Sometimes these ideological contrasts are aligned, but the former pair ('conservative' and 'liberal') have been and remain more common and influential in shaping

perceptions and opinions. Although the origins of this way of representing differences first emerged in Continental Europe in the nineteenth century, it became dominant in the twentieth as a result of US journalism in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), coincident with the American politicization of a whole range of secular cultural, moral, and social issues.

Part of my concern here is to urge rejection of these as general terms of analysis of Catholicism, or at least to circumscribe their applications to matters inessential to Catholic faith and morals *per se*. In aid of that, and by way of broader purpose, I will discuss the nature of Catholicism itself. Much, if not all, of what I say will be familiar to many readers, but my experience in the UK, the USA, and Australia of speaking with interested laity, college and university students, Catholic teachers, including of religious education, and clergy, is that important elements of what follow are seemingly unknown to many of them. In some cases, this was to be expected, in others it was extraordinary and reflects the parlous state of Catholic education and formation which is especially scandalous in relation to Catholic educators and religious.¹

2. Challenges, crises, and divisions

In an address to the 2012 Synod of Bishops on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, the then Augustinian Prior General, Robert Prevost, spoke of how religion, and Roman Catholicism in particular, is regarded by the secular world:

Religion is at best tolerated by mass media as tame and quaint when it does not actively oppose positions on ethical issues that the media have embraced as their own. However, when religious voices are raised in opposition to these positions, mass media can target religion, labelling it as ideological and insensitive in regard to the so-called ‘vital needs’ of people in the contemporary world. ... Catholic pastors who preach against the legalization of abortion or the redefinition of marriage are portrayed as being ideologically driven, severe and uncaring ...²

While this kind of challenge is now familiar, it is relevant here to begin by noting that besides suffering external attacks and persecution across the centuries, the Church has long struggled with its own problems, often for extended periods. From the fourth to the sixth centuries, it was riven by the Donatist controversy concerning the issue of whether the sinfulness of someone in holy orders invalidated the sacraments he administered. Prior to the creation of seminaries required by the

¹Central sections of the following are adapted from Part One of *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*, 2024.

²‘Intervention’ (contribution) to the Sixth General Congregation of the Synod of Bishops on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* 11 October 2012—see Holy See Press Office Bulletin <https://archive.ph/aQUUG>. That text is described as a summary, and translations are not official. Subsequently, however, Prevost recorded in English his contribution under the title ‘The Counter-culture of the New Evangelisation’. It can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WttXvZt3m6k> and is the source of this and later extracts. See also this *Catholic News Service* interview with him on the same subject <https://www.usccb.org/news/2025/full-text-2012-cns-interview-future-pope-leo-xiv-new-evangelization>

sixteenth-century Council of Trent, the formation of priests could often be haphazard, and clerical appointment and advancement were often unconnected with virtue or merit, depending instead on favours, influence, and control. Seminaries were intended to bring proper education and order into the forming of clergy, emphasizing spiritual development and philosophical and theological studies, but they themselves (like monasteries, priories, and abbeys) sometimes became centres of powerbroking and impropriety. Theological disputes, clerical and religious careerism, and violations of solemn promises and vows are nothing new.

There have long been various crises and scandals in dioceses and in religious societies. In 1646, the 'Piarists' (Order of Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools), the oldest religious order dedicated to teaching poor children and youths, were suppressed by Pope Innocent X because of the sexual abuse of school children by the head of the order Fr Stefano Cherubini; and it was only restored a decade later.³ Religious communities were sometimes centres of dissent leading to heresy. The Jansenists of the seventeenth century grew and flourished at the Port Royal abbeys and schools in and around Paris. As the community came to be condemned, Pope Clement XI ordered that their schools be shut, then refused the abbeys permission to accept novices, and finally the principal convent was closed, the nuns were forcibly removed, and most of the buildings were destroyed.⁴ Clerical abuse, dissent, and papal suppression are nothing new.

Later, in the eighteenth century, the second abbey came under attack from the French Revolutionaries pursuing the cause of reason against faith, state against Church, and atheism against Christianity. Under the title, 'The Cult of Reason' (*Culte de la Raison*) conceived as an atheistic replacement for Catholicism, the 'Godless revolution' had its first feast day on 10 November 1793. During this 'Festival', Catholic Notre Dame and other cathedrals across France were transformed into 'Temples of Reason': the high altar was replaced with an altar to Liberty, and in the sanctuary Festive girls surrounded the Goddess of Reason, who was installed on the Bishop's Chair. The following century, in the first year of his chancellorship, Otto von Bismarck aligned himself with anti-Catholic liberals to launch a cultural war (*kulturkampf*) against the Catholic Church in Germany. This began in 1871, the year following the opening of the First Vatican council (itself an occasion of internal Church conflict leading to a break-away 'Old Catholic Union of Churches') and ran until 1878. It involved legal penalties against German bishops and priests and control over aspects of Catholic education. Anti-Catholic progressivism is nothing new.

Evidently, in the present day, there are frequent aggressive secular attacks upon the Church, and there are often cutting divisions among Roman Catholics about teachings on matters of faith, morals, and liturgy, and about the nature of authority with regard to these. Both have become sharper and more public in the present century, in part because of the ubiquity of media commentary and the internet and social networks. But more substantially, because of a series of issues. Most prominent among these are the widespread scandals of sexual abuse by clergy, religious, and laity, and the failures

³See Karen Liebreich, *Fallen Order: Intrigue, Heresy, and Scandal in the Rome of Galileo and Caravaggio* (London: Grove Press, 2004).

⁴See J. D. Crichton, *Saints or Sinners: Jansenism and Jansenists in Seventeenth Century France* (Dublin: Veritas, 1996).

of their superiors to deal with these matters due to culpable ignorance, avoidance, or concealment: in some cases fearing reputational damage to the Church and its institutions, in many others through being personally compromised by their own actions. Relatedly, there is the set of issues around sexuality and sexual activity more generally.

A further factor is the decline of vocations leading to demands for revision of the celibacy rule and for more extensive liturgical and sacramental roles for laity. Again, in part because of theological arguments, but also because of the rise of equal-rights feminism, there are demands for, and opposition to, equal access for women to the diaconate, priesthood, and ultimately the episcopacy (and thereby the papacy). There are also disputes about the authority of scripture and sacred tradition, about various doctrines and teachings, about what it means to be Roman Catholic, and about the status of other denominations and religions.

3. Three dimensions of alignment

With respect to these various issues, and more generally, Catholics are increasingly divided along one or more of the following three axes: theology (orthodoxy vs heterodoxy), moral and political values (conservatism vs liberalism), and religious and more broadly cultural practice (traditionalism vs progressivism). It is important to note that these are distinct dimensions of alignment, and it is theoretically and practically possible to occupy any of the eight combinations. One may, for example, be orthodox with respect to credal matters, liberal in politics, and liturgically traditional; or heterodox theologically, morally conservative, and liturgically progressive. Nonetheless, there are reasons and causes (personal and cultural) that incline people to group their beliefs and attitudes in line with the first or second of each pair, respectively. Thus, the familiar three-dimensional opposition among laity and clergy between orthodoxy, conservatism, and traditionalism; and heterodoxy, liberalism, and progressivism, as evidenced by the difference in the UK between the *Catholic Herald* and the *Tablet* and in North America between *Crisis Magazine* and the *National Catholic Reporter*.

The highpoint of Catholicism across the Anglosphere, as measured in terms of church attendance, baptisms, marriages, vocations, church and school building, membership of societies, and pious practices, etc., was in the 1950s when Catholic education tended to involve formal catechesis and pious practises in combination with a focus on Church-based community identity. Today, numbers in each category have declined at an accelerating rate, and within Catholic education there has been a trend to replace the idea and practice of instruction in articles of faith and moral teachings with that of cultivating an 'ethos' and a shift in focus from Church to society. 'Conservatives' argue that this has amounted to a capitulation to secular values encouraged by faithless and worldly Catholics, while 'liberals' continue a critique of the previous condition as coercive, repressive, clerical, and infantilizing. Both of these outlooks tend to rather restricted considerations of context and of the nature of Catholic tradition. 'Liberals' often confuse *authority* with *authoritarianism*, taking the negative character of the latter as a ground of criticism of the former; while 'Conservatives' often conflate *tradition* with *traditionalism*, assuming that the former entails the latter. Greater knowledge and clarity of thought would caution against such assumptions.

Had those responsible for Catholic formation in the 1950s been more perceptive and thought harder about the state and direction of society more generally, then

they might have developed a broader, more engaging, less defensive and triumphalist approach to the wider world. Equally, present-day 'liberal' Catholics might be less inclined to go with the flow of progressive, empowering diverse self-definition if they look at the way in which it tends to hedonism, narcissism, and the societal disassociation of 'identity' politics. As it is, two self-conscious responses to secular liberalism, *adoption* and *reaction* (in the forms of 'progressive liberal' and 'traditionalist conservative' Catholicism, respectively), have done nothing to counter lapsation, but only deepened divisions among those continuing to identify as Catholics, and thereby threatened the collapse of the house they both claim to be intent on saving.

4. Identity constituting natures

In the case of human individuals, we can identify and distinguish different levels of personal features: proceeding downwards and inwards from *manner*, to *temperament*, to *personality*, to *character*, and thereby to fundamental *nature*. Behaviour may reflect any of these, but authenticity relates to that which expresses the real and enduring nature of a thing. The same is true for human institutions, reflecting but also influencing the characteristics of the individuals that live and work within them. An individual or an institution can reform its manner more easily than it can change its personality; but character is close to the heart or nature of a thing, and the last cannot be changed while still remaining the same entity. The critical issue in considering identity, therefore, is that of *nature*; for what it is to be and to continue as one and the same person or institution is, in each case, to have one and the same enduring fundamental nature.

In thinking about mission and general purpose, therefore, it is necessary first to get clear about what a Catholic institution (from the Vatican to international Catholic charities to schools and colleges) is, that is to say, what is its identity-constituting nature. Evidently, each institution, like each individual human being, has distinguishing characteristics, but these belong to the levels of manners and personalities. And just as we may ask what makes different individuals all human beings, so we can ask what makes different Catholic institutions all authentically Catholic ones. In other words, the deeper question is again that of a common intrinsic nature.

Since talk of 'identity' has become culturally ubiquitous and a matter of controversy and contest, it is now more than ever especially important to distinguish two ways of thinking about the matter: one *subjective* and the other *objective*. According to the first, subjective view, identity is self-determined and self-confirming. This means that someone or some institution is what it (seriously and sincerely) says it is, and its saying so is conclusive 'proof' of the matter and not open to question. In this perspective, one cannot be challenged or corrected about one's self-proclaimed identity.

According to the second, objective view, by contrast, questions about identity can only be answered by investigating objective facts (though subjective claims may still be taken some account of). 'Saying so doesn't make it so', and sincere claims to being this or that are not by themselves proofs of the matter. This view is universal in natural science and widespread in philosophy, history, law, and other traditional disciplines. It is also implicit and often explicit in Catholic theology. More broadly, it is central to Catholicism's understanding of itself as being the institution created by Jesus Christ in gathering and commissioning the Apostles, and their chosen successors, to carry on his work of salvation. As we read in Matthew's Gospel:

And Jesus came and said to them. 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always; to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18–20).⁵

The question of the identity of a Catholic institution presupposes an answer to the prior question of what it is to be Catholic. This is not an issue of manner, temperament, or personality, nor is it one of circumstantial characteristics, and nor is it self-determining or self-confirming. Catholicism has a robust objective nature comprising a synthesis of Hebrew and Christian scripture, apostolic tradition, conciliar and other authoritative teachings, and sacramental practices, together consolidated and expressed in orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

There are, in addition, liturgical forms, institutional structures, pious devotions, cultural traditions, and many other features that have developed out of this core nature, but which are *not* themselves strictly part of it. Here again the distinction between tradition and traditionalism is relevant. For it is important not to confuse, on the one hand, what has been handed on (*traditum*) as Christ's revelation to the Apostles and confirmed to them by the Holy Spirit, which is the essence of the deposit of the faith; with, on the other hand, reverence for particular historical forms and customs (*accessiones*). As Pope Francis observed in a 2022 public address:

Tradition is not static: it is dynamic, aimed at moving forward. There was a French theologian from the fifth century, a monk, who wondered, talking about this, how dogma could progress without ruining the inspiration of one's own tradition, how it could grow without hiding from the past. And he said in Latin: '*Ut anni scilicet consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate*': 'it progresses by being consolidated with the years, developing over time, sublimating with age'. This is tradition: we need to educate in tradition, but in order to grow.⁶

How the core nature is realized and enacted may legitimately vary according to circumstances, but there is also the possibility that a 'variation' (whether 'traditionalist' or 'progressive') may become, as the author whom Pope Francis quoted observed, an aberration or corruption and thereby cease to be Catholic, though it might seek to operate under that name. How that distinction is to be drawn is not by *parti pris* commentators and academics, but by reference to scripture and sacred tradition as interpreted and proclaimed by the worldwide bishops in unity with the Bishop

⁵All scriptural passages are from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, Anglicized Text* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005).

⁶Pope Francis, 'Address to Members of the Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education Project', 20 April 2022, available at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220420-catholic-education-project.html. The unnamed author to whom Pope Francis refers is St Vincent de Lérins. The quoted line continues '*incorruptum tamen illibatumque permaneat et universis partium suarum mensuris cunctisque quasi membris*': 'yet let it remain uncorrupted and unblemished complete and perfect in all the measurement of its parts.' *Commonitorium Primum*, c. 23, 56. 1. English translation by C.A. Heurtley in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 11 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894).

of Rome, as confirmed by Vatican II in its 1965 Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei Verbum*:

Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (Acts 2:42, Greek text) so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort. But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. (*Dei Verbum* 10).⁷

5. Catholicity, apostolicity, and authority

Roman Catholicism is more (though not less) than an association of fellow believers or a church community. For, like the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, and like the autonomous Oriental Catholic Churches (including the Armenian, Chaldean, Maronite, Melkite, Syro-Malabar, and Ukrainian ones), it traces its origins to apostolic foundations and holds to a core of authoritatively defined credal and conciliar teachings and sacramental practices (though the later councils they recognize differ in some cases).

It is crucial to note that even where churches in these three groups (Roman, Eastern, and Oriental) disagree on some points, they nevertheless recognize one another as authentic Apostolic Churches, acknowledging the validity of one another's priesthood and of one another's sacraments. Standing behind this is the belief that 'Apostolic tradition' is not just a cultural or sociological phenomenon but the necessary means for handing on and preserving the deposit of the faith given by Jesus to the Apostles for the sake of the salvation of humankind. The authority with which it does so is not that of human powers or roles but of God working in and through human agents.

This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. *Dei Verbum* op. cit.

It follows that Catholic identity is not a cultural, or psychological, or sociological phenomenon, or something to be self-determined by the ideas and choices of individuals or groups, or negotiated in line with the attitudes and values of the prevailing secular culture. Instead, it is something whose identity derives from Christ's teaching and his commission to and empowerment of the first Apostles and is expressed in the teachings, sacramental practice, and religious faith, hope, and charity of its members. Importantly, also, it is not sectarian, not believing that it exists for the sake of its own

⁷All references to documents of Vatican II are to the official texts gathered on the Holy See site at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm

members only, but rather is obliged to reach out and bring others into its communion by preaching the word of God, teaching the faith, and living it in practice:

As the Son was sent by the Father, so He too sent the Apostles, saying: 'Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.' ... The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth. – Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 17.

Catholicism is compatible with, and even has a reason to celebrate, diverse cultural dispositions and sensibilities. Those who take a sociological or psychological approach tend to confuse these matters. What should be of concern to Catholic institutions of all kinds and of all levels is that they be true to Catholic identity, holding fast to that which has been tested and found to be good and received and handed on as part of the deposit of faith (cf. 1 *Thessalonians* 5:21). But that 'holding fast' is not to be confused with clinging to a relic of an imagined past. Rather, it is a living, grace-infused faith that should encourage confidence in moving forward and meeting the challenges of the present and of the future. Pope Francis engaged this issue in the previously cited 2022 address to Catholic educators:

Because the tree, in order to grow, needs to have a tight relationship with the roots. Do not stay fixed at the roots, no, but in a relationship with the roots. There is a poet from my homeland who says something beautiful: 'Everything the tree has produced comes from what it has underground'. Without roots, there is no moving forward. It is only through roots that we become people: not statues in a museum, like certain traditionalists, who are cold, stiff, rigid, who think that being prepared for life means living stuck to the roots. This relationship with one's roots is necessary, but we also need to move forward. And this is the true tradition: taking from the past to move forward.⁸

6. Catholic spirituality

As traditional religious belief and practice declined in Western-style liberal societies, there arose the trend of saying such things as 'I am not religious, but I believe in spirituality' and 'I am not a traditionally religious person, but I am a spiritual one'. This style of talk often went with agnosticism (and sometimes with soft atheism), but it typically retained vestiges of, or adopted counterparts for, familiar religious notions. So, instead of speaking of 'reverence for God's Creation', one might talk of 'respect for all of nature', and in place of 'devotional prayer', propose 'personal reflection' or 'meditation'. Again, while departing from the idea of divine law and of the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity, it was common to talk of 'universal rights', and of personal 'open-mindedness', 'positivity', and 'respect'.

In saying these things, people seem to be clearer about what they are rejecting than about what they are affirming. In fact, it has generally been part of this trend away

⁸Op. cit., fn. 6

from substantial and determinate religious faith not just to abandon traditional beliefs and practices but explicitly to criticize them, certainly as they are associated with Judaism and Christianity. Hence such beliefs, particularly in their traditional embodiments, are often said to be 'doctrinaire', 'dogmatic', 'exclusionary', 'guilt-inducing', 'moralizing', 'narrow', and 'un-self-critical'. However, whereas clear sense can be made of human rights and of respect for persons if they are rooted in the dignity of each as a unique, created *imago Dei*, it is not evident what, if anything, can ground natural rights or intrinsic human dignity on a nonreligious basis.

Something similar to the 'spiritual but not religious' trend began to emerge within Christian denominations with some saying that their 'religious' life was not a matter of adhering to traditional teachings about faith and morals, or traditional liturgies and rituals, but of having a 'spiritual' orientation. This contrasting of the religious and the spiritual should be puzzling, since Christianity in general, and more specifically Catholicism (and Eastern Orthodoxy), have, since the early centuries, laid emphasis on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the gifts and efficacy of grace, in nurturing personal spiritual development. Accordingly, they also developed traditions intended to further and promote it. Hence their common development of spiritual exercises and practices, spiritual direction and forms of individual and communal spiritual life, and spiritual writings.

Roman Catholicism has produced the greatest Christian classics of these sorts: Augustine's *Confessions* (c. 400), Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God* (c.1260), Ugolino's *Little Flowers of St. Francis* (c. 1325), Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* (1370s), Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue of Divine Providence* (1370s), Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (1420s), Ignatius of Loyola's *The Spiritual Exercises* (1520s), John of the Cross's *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1570s), Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* (1570s), Frances de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life* (c. 1608), Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God* (1660s), Louis de Montfort's *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (1712), Jean Pierre de Caussade's *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (1730s-40s), and Therese of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul* (1890s) – with many lesser known works before, between, and after these.

Since these authors were themselves generally members of religious orders and societies, were bound by solemn vows and subjected themselves to religious superiors, and were committed to Catholic doctrines and moral teachings, it should be clear that believing in and adhering to authoritative tradition and doctrine are not incompatible with having a spiritual life, and indeed with entering into the depths of spirituality and finding treasures to be shared with others. Furthermore, in each of the cases mentioned, the spiritual insights and guidance draw directly from Catholic tradition. This suggests that the combination of orthodox belief and practice, and of spiritual profundity, may be more than accidental. Perhaps it may even be that authentic Christian spirituality actually depends constitutively upon thinking, feeling, and acting within the framework taught by Christ and the Apostles and explored and unfolded within authoritative Christian tradition. Put another way, the very idea of spirituality as understood within Christianity, and more specifically within Roman Catholicism, is not a matter of personal 'self-discovery' but presupposes Christian apostolic teaching.

Besides the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles, the earliest Christian work, the *Didache* (The Lord's Teaching through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations) establishes five elements

and connections to be found in subsequent spiritual writings.⁹ First, it is *Christocentric*: Jesus is the model for the Christian and is present within the community of believers through Eucharist, prayer, and scripture. Second, it is *eschatological*: directing believers to prepare for the life of the world to come. Third, it is *ascetical* in the sense of urging simplicity and the practice of virtue. Fourth, it is *liturgical*, stressing the importance of worship, with the principal focus being the Eucharist. Fifth, it is *social*, focusing on community, unity, and charity.

It is significant also that as eastern and western traditions of Christian spirituality developed, they converged on a three-stage structure of spiritual development involving *purgation*, *illumination*, and *perfection*.¹⁰ Sometimes, these are related to the sacraments of *baptism* (which washes away original sin), *eucharist* (which illuminates mind and spirit through the presence of Christ), and *confirmation* (which seals and perfects the covenant created in baptism). At other times, they are related to aspects of Old and especially New Testament teachings about the routes to and from salvation, as in Paul's direction to the Galatians:

I tell you, be guided by the Spirit, and you will no longer yield to self-indulgence. The desires of self-indulgence are always in opposition to the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are in opposition to self-indulgence: ... When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: sexual vice, impurity, and sensuality, the worship of false gods and sorcery; antagonisms and rivalry, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels, disagreements, factions and malice, drunkenness, orgies and all such things. And about these, I tell you now as I have told you in the past, that people who behave in these ways will not inherit the kingdom of God. On the other hand, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control; ... Since we are living by the Spirit, let our behaviour be guided by the Spirit and let us not be conceited or provocative and envious of one another. (Galatians 5:16-26).

7. The indwelling of the holy spirit

In contrast to these clear and rigorous understandings that connect spirituality to the progression *from sin, through grace to salvation*, the post-Christian, or post-church, use of the term 'spiritual' is generally vague and typically self-approving, associating itself with lack of rigidity, openness, and so on. The historical Christian source of the notion, however, has nothing to do with personal attitudes and sentiments but refers to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within the soul of the individual or of the community (and usually the former in consequence of the latter). Resultant from this indwelling, and manifesting it, are gifts for individuals' own sanctification and for the help of others: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, courage, piety, and wonder and awe

⁹Aaron Milavec trans. *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

¹⁰See R. Garrigou-Lagrange OP, *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1938), and for an exploration of parallels between stages of spiritual and psychological development see Benedict Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

(Isaiah 11:2-3) and the fruits of the Spirit described by Paul: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control (again Galatians 5:22-23).

In this understanding, therefore, spirituality is connected to the Holy Trinity and to the special relation between its Second and Third Persons: Jesus was *conceived* by the Holy Spirit, was baptized in the presence of, and *anointed* by the Holy Spirit, was *filled with* the Holy Spirit, was *resurrected through* the Holy Spirit, and himself promised to send the Holy Spirit to animate and confirm the Apostles and their successors. Catholic spirituality is the practice of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the very opposite of self-oriented fulfilment. With these points in mind, it is important to identify and diagnose two recent trends, that, at first sight, may appear benign but that can easily and quite quickly lead away from Catholic faith and practice.

The first is a shift from the teachings of Jesus Christ to 'Spirit-oriented thinking'. There are excellent reasons to reflect upon the nature and activity of the Holy Spirit and to pray to the Spirit, but the trend in question involves treating 'the Spirit' as if it were an alternative to God the Father and Christ the Son, a separately existing divinity, then choosing to 'listen to it' in order to escape some of the hard sayings of Jesus, thereby marginalizing, ignoring, or rejecting them. But this is in direct opposition to the teaching of Christ on the union of the Persons and the unity of their purpose: Jesus said:

'I am the Way; I am Truth and Life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father too. From this moment you know him and have seen him. ... I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate and counsellor [Paráklētos] to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth whom the world can never accept since it neither sees nor knows him; but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you'. – John 14:6–7, 16–17.

The Gospels tell us that some of Jesus's teachings amazed and astonished hearers (Mark 1:22, 27), 'they could not bear to hear' (John 6:60), and from the time of hearing them many who had previously followed 'could walk no more with him' (John 6:66). Excluding duplications between Gospels, scripture gives us over 30,000 words of Jesus, and many of these are no less challenging today than they were to his immediate contemporaries. By contrast with Jesus's abundant and specific directions, no actual words are directly attributed to the Spirit.¹¹ Instead, its activity is to be found in confirming the Apostles in their faith, empowering them in their works, and inspiring them and the Church in teaching and interpreting Christ's words. The Holy Spirit, then, does not provide an alternative script but confirms that which has been produced and inspires the reading and interpretation of it by the Church. Turning to the Spirit, therefore, is not like seeking a second opinion in the hope that it might provide a more welcome and palatable message. When Jesus said 'The Father and I are One' (John 10:30) he was

¹¹In Acts 28: 25–27 Paul writes 'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah...' and quotes Isaiah 6:9; and in Hebrews 10:15–17 Paul writes 'And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds', he also adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more'. But, again, the quoted words are from the Hebrew bible, in this case from Jeremiah 31: 33.

denounced and attacked; but just as Jesus and the Father are One, so are Jesus and the Spirit. And the warning against abusing the Spirit comes from Jesus himself: 'Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not gather in with me throws away. And so I tell you, every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven'. (Matthew 12:30-31).

The second increasing trend is to look not to scripture, nor to sacred tradition, nor to sacramental life to discern the Spirit, but to turn to 'the world' in expectation of hearing its voice. The pressing question, of course, is whether 'its voice' is that of the Spirit or that of the world. This trend is of a piece with the 'spiritual, but not church-bound' turn. Certainly, it is not for us to circumscribe where and when the Spirit is active, but there is evidently a pervasive confusion between the idea of hearing the Spirit *in* the present age and hearing the spirit *of* the present age.

The familiar injunction to 'Listen to what the Spirit is saying' is (though those who voice it are often unaware of the fact) a quote from the Apocalypse. The full sentence is 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the spirit is saying to the churches'. The churches in question were those at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, all founded by the Apostle Paul, or perhaps in a couple of instances by one of his disciples. John evidently believes that the injunction to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches is of great importance since he goes on to repeat it six times in the course of two chapters. The question of where, when, and how the Holy Spirit 'speaks' is a complex one. Also, it cannot be resolved without taking account of the fact that the source of Christian understanding of the Spirit and of its work originates in the apostolic period and relates to its threefold role in the lives of the Apostles: guaranteeing authentic revelation; bringing spiritual animation; and inspiring testimony on behalf of the Gospel.

One reason, however, why people think that if they listen they will hear new truths blowing in the wind is that they conflate two seemingly similar but, in fact, very different ideas. First, and again, that of the Spirit in the world (which is what is spoken of in scripture) and that of the spirit of the world as espoused by modern secular thinkers. The first, in the form with which Christians might properly be concerned, appears in and is handed down from the apostolic age, as affirmed by Vatican II in *Dei Verbum* (the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation). The second is a notion developed by post-Christian thinkers in the 18th and early 19th centuries and associated with the idea of the *Geist der Zeiten*, or the more familiar *Zeitgeist*—literally the spirit of the time.

Zeitgeist talk has become commonplace in popular commentary as referring to current mores and cultural trends, but as a concept it lacks criteria by which to distinguish between the ephemeral and the enduring and between the shallow and the deep. Thinking in terms of the Holy Spirit expressing itself is a more responsible and disciplined matter, for it requires an interpretative triangulation between scripture, authoritative church teaching, and lived experience. Moreover, such thinking has to reconcile whatever idea it inclines toward with conclusions arrived at in past centuries. Once again, the ideas of spirituality, the Spirit, and of listening to the Spirit all have their origins with Catholic tradition; and they work together in clarifying and developing the substance of that tradition. They cannot then be treated as an alternative to it.

8. Revelation and the development of doctrine

Here it is relevant to refer to an important aspect of Catholic teaching, common also to the Orthodox and Oriental Churches, which is the distinction between public and private revelation. The former relates to what is given for the sake of general human salvation, through scripture, apostolic teaching, and authoritative tradition. Catholicism holds, as do these other apostolic churches, that the revelation entrusted to the apostles extended beyond what came to be recorded in scripture, hence the importance of apostolic instruction as a complementary source. Like the scriptural teachings, this aspect of Christ's revelation is taken to have been confirmed to its apostolic recipients by the Holy Spirit.¹² This explains the further claim that general revelation was complete with the end of the original apostolic period or, as it is sometimes put, 'with the death of the last apostle'. The possibility of subsequent private revelations remains; but nothing in those that may be additional to the body of public revelation adds to the deposit of faith and the general economy of salvation.

In its article on the matter: 'Christ Jesus—Mediator and Fullness of all Revelation' (65–67) the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states the matter briefly and boldly: 'God has said everything in his Word' ... 'There will be no further revelation' then quotes from *Dei Verbum* 4: 'The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tim. 6:14 and Tit. 2:13).' It immediately adds, however, 'Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries'.¹³

Although a general point, this bears on the *development* of doctrine in contradistinction to *change* in doctrine. In his *Essay* J.H. Newman (following Vincent de Lérins) writes of 'Genuine Developments Contrasted with Corruptions', he writes:

It becomes necessary in consequence to assign certain characteristics of faithful developments, which none but faithful developments have, and the presence of which serves as a test to discriminate between them and corruptions. ... There is no corruption if it retains one and the same type, the same principles, the same organization; if its beginnings anticipate its subsequent phases, and its later phenomena protect and subserve its earlier; if it has a power of assimilation and revival, and a vigorous action from first to last.¹⁴

The Second Vatican Council also links the matter of grasping the full significance of revelation to Spirit-inspired discernment and authoritative guidance:

¹²See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Chicago: Benzinger, 1947) III, q.25, a.3 ad 4. 'The Apostles, led by the inward instinct of the Holy Ghost, handed down to the churches certain instructions which they did not put in writing, but which have been ordained, in accordance with the observance of the Church as practiced by the faithful as time went on. Wherefore the Apostle says (2 Thessalonians. 2:14): "Stand fast; and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word"—that is by word of mouth—"or by our epistle"—that is by word put into writing'.

¹³*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_PH.HTM

¹⁴See J.H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, Sixth Edition, Chapter 5, Section 2, available online at <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/html>

When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church, and thus, all those who believe would have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father. ...[D]iscernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. *It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God.* Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life (*my emphasis*) *Lumen Gentium* 4, 12. 20.

While it is obviously important to be aware of changes in the surrounding culture, and of what is being said and done within it (issues of which the newly elected Pope Leo is acutely aware),¹⁵ this is not the same as listening out for, let alone listening to, the Holy Spirit. The latter involves discrimination informed by knowledge of and adherence to Catholic sacred tradition and by the application of criteria such as those proposed by Newman. In this connection, it is important also to be clear about the meaning and import of the idea of the sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and the sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*). These two expressions, particularly the first, began to appear more extensively following Vatican II, which, in *Lumen Gentium*, used the former to introduce Catholic teaching on the capacity to recognize and understand the truths of authentic revelation.

If one reads *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), and recent works such as *Sensus Fidei in the life of the Church* (2014) by the International Theological Commission, it quickly becomes clear that this idea is quite different and distinct from that of general opinion or sentiment. Here the distinction is somewhat analogous to the difference between hearing *the voice of the Spirit in the world* and hearing *the voice of the world*. Vatican II emphasizes totality, grace-filled discernment, the Holy Spirit, and fidelity. Similarly, in its sustained reflection on the subject, the International Theological Commission writes:

The *sensus fidei* is essential to the life of the Church, and it is necessary now to consider how to discern and identify authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidei*. Such a discernment is particularly required in situations of tension when the authentic *sensus fidei* needs to be distinguished from expressions simply of popular opinion, particular interests or the spirit of the age. ... Dispositions needed for authentic participation in the *sensus fidei*: (a) Participation in the life of the Church (b) Listening to the word of God (c) Openness to reason

¹⁵See as well as the contribution to the Synod on Evangelisation the interview published on the Augustinian Order website 'Above all a Bishop must proclaim Jesus Christ' on the occasion in 2025 of his being created a Cardinal <https://www.augustinianorder.org/post/interview-with-cardinal-robert-prevost-osa-above-all-a-bishop-must-proclaim-jesus-christ>, and his contribution to the Vatican Press Briefing on the General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 25 October 2023 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQxkzHM14Xc>

(d) Adherence to the magisterium [the teaching authority of the Church] (e) Holiness – humility, freedom and joy.¹⁶

From spirituality to the Holy Spirit, and from listening to the Spirit to having and manifesting the sense of the faith, the Catholic understanding is clear and distinct. The life that Christ offers and provides, and that the Spirit confirms and sustains, is the same as that given to the Apostles and handed on by them and their successors through the communities they founded. It is the same supernatural life of grace that the present-day Church exists to bring to and sustain in its members.

But as, previously noted, the Church is not a sect seeking salvation only for its own. Jesus commissioned the Apostles to ‘Go and make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you’ (Matthew 28:19–20). Nor does the Church work only for those who share its faith. But just as the Israelites were told that they are to be a light unto the nations of the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6), so Christ’s Church: ‘You are light for the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house’ (Matthew 5:14–15).

9. Contrasting interpretations

In conclusion, I return from the enduring past to the immediate present and the election of Fr Robert Prevost as the 267th Roman Pontiff. From the moment of it being announced ‘Habemus Papam ... Robertum Franciscum ... qui sibi nomen imposuit Leonem XIV’ and his appearance minutes later on the balcony of St. Peter’s, the effort began to place him within the two-dimensional framework formed by the axes: conservative/liberal, and traditional/progressive. On the one hand, it was said that, having been elevated by Pope Francis thrice: in 2014 as a Bishop in Peru, in 2023 as Prefect of the Vatican Dicastery of Bishops and later as Cardinal-deacon, and in 2025 as Cardinal-bishop, he was the late Pope’s preferred successor and a continuity figure on the progressive end. On the other, it was observed that, in marked contrast to Francis, he emerged on the balcony vested in the same style as Pope Benedict with lace-trimmed stole and scarlet mozetta, took as a name that of papal predecessors, and said the main parts of his first mass with his fellow cardinals in Latin – then leading them in a plainsong rendering of the Marian antiphon *Regina Caeli*. Might all of this not suggest a reaffirmation of the traditional? Similarly, many commentators observed his adherence to the social justice tradition, option for the poor and implied criticism of the Trump/Vance policies on the treatment of immigrants, to suggest that he was solidly on the liberal side. But others, in evidence of apparent conservatism, pointed to his 2012 commentary ‘The Counter-culture of the New Evangelisation’ in which he spoke against ‘beliefs and practices that are at odds with the Gospel, for example abortion, homosexual lifestyle, euthanasia... and how alternative families comprised of same-sex partners and their adopted children are so benignly and sympathetically portrayed in

¹⁶International Theological Commission, ‘*Sensus Fidei*’ in *the Life of the Church* (2014) chapter 4: ‘How to Discern Authentic Manifestations of the *Sensus Fidei*’ – available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html

television programs and cinema today'. Also, his 2023 remarks on the issue of women's ordination in a briefing on the progress of the Synod on Synodality where he said:

We are all familiar with the very significant and long tradition of the church, and that apostolic tradition is something that has been spelled out very clearly, especially if you want to talk about the question of women's ordination to the priesthood. ... However, something that needs to be said also is that ordaining women, and there's been some women that have said this interestingly enough, 'clericalizing women' does not necessarily solve a problem, it might make a new problem" And that perhaps we need to look at a new understanding or different understanding of both leadership, power, authority, and service—above all service—in the Church from the different perspectives that can be, if you will, brought to the life of the Church by women and men. ... I think that one of the things that has become clear in the time leading up to [the Synod] is that it's not just a given that because in society women are recognised: a woman can be President, or a woman can have many kinds of roles leadership role in the world. ... It isn't as simple as saying that at this stage we're going to change the tradition of the Church after 2,000 years on any one of those points, ...¹⁷

His choice of papal name has also been taken to indicate ideological allegiance. It was widely observed that the last Leo (XIII) was the author of *Rerum Novarum* (1891) which is seen to have set the foundations for 'Catholic Social Teaching', a phrase much deployed by 'liberals'. Unobserved, however, were his first three encyclicals promulgated in the first two years of his pontificate thereby indicating his priorities. In *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* (1878) Leo wrote that 'the source of [the evils that afflict mankind] lies chiefly, We are convinced, in this, that the holy and venerable authority of the Church, which in God's name rules mankind, upholding and defending all lawful authority, has been despised and set aside'. Later the same year he promulgated *Quod Apostolici Muneris* in which he wrote of

That sect of men who, under various and almost barbarous names, are called socialists, communists, or nihilists, and who, spread over all the world ... strive to bring to a head what they have long been planning - the overthrow of all civil society whatsoever. ... they proclaim the absolute equality of all men in rights and duties. They debase the natural union of man and woman, which is held sacred even among barbarous peoples; and its bond, by which the family is chiefly held together, they weaken, or even deliver up to lust.

The following year he issued *Aeterni Patris* in which he commended the study of philosophy in the service of defending the faith and moral teachings of the Church, and specifically and extensively celebrated Thomas Aquinas as the 'chief and master' of the scholastics commanding Catholic colleges and universities to study his works – thereby famously inaugurating the Thomist revival of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Then, 5 years after *Rerum Novarum* he issued *Apostolicae Curae* (1896) in which

¹⁷Vatican Press Briefing on the General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 25 October 2023 see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQxkzHM14Xc>

he upheld the prior papal opinion, now making it a matter of explicit teaching, that Anglican Orders are 'null and void'.¹⁸

In so far as one wished to place Leo XIII in a moral, cultural, and ecclesial framework using the terminology favoured by the commentators, it might be plausible to locate him as 'conservative' and 'traditionalist', which should give reason to pause before classifying him as liberal and progressive on account of choosing to be named Pius XIV. My interest, however, is not to try to interpret what may not be signs of anything very much, let alone to make a case for one or the other of the competing hypotheses. Rather, my concern is to urge setting aside what are essentially political and crudely totalizing ways of characterizing the Church, its positions, and its Petrine leadership. Earlier I mentioned a third dimension of assessment: orthodoxy and heterodoxy – adherence to or deviation from what has been given and handed on – in this case the deposit of faith: the body of revealed truths given by Christ to his apostles and recorded in scripture and in the apostolic tradition. On this account, the main things to be concerned with are Catholicity, Apostolicity, and Orthodoxy, and there is no reason to think that Leo XIV is anything other than an embodiment of these, and very good reason to think that he may set out to heal the unnecessary divisions consequent upon seeing the Church in political rather than religious terms.

¹⁸See *Apostolicae Curae: On the Nullity of Anglican Orders*, 1896 available at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/l13curae.htm>